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The Gospel of Mary of Magdala

Jesus and the First Woman Apostle

Karen L. King

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Jesus and the First Woman Apostle

Karen L. King

The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle

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Preface

Several foundations provided grant support to allow for work on this manuscript, and I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to them: the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation, the Women's Studies in Religion Program of the Harvard Divinity School, and the Graves Foundation. In addition, my thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Travel to Collections Award (1996), which allowed me to make my own transcription of the fragments in Berlin, Oxford, and Manchester. For their hospitality and help, I would like to thank Dr. William Brashear, Dr. Günther Poetke, and Dr. Ingeborg Müller from the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin; Dr. Revel A. Coles, Papyrology Rooms, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; and Dr. Peter McNiven of the Rylands Museum, Manchester.

The study of the *Gospel of Mary* which follows has benefited from many voices. Over the course of preparing this manuscript, I made presentations to numerous academic conferences, university courses, church groups from a wide range of Christian denominations, and feminist spirituality workshops. The critical and constructive responses of these groups has had a substantial impact on my own thinking about the meaning and significance of the *Gospel of Mary.* I would like to thank all those whose questions, comments, and objections led to beneficial rethinking and reworking of this manuscript. For the time and effort they gave in reading various portions of the manuscript and supplying vital critique and support, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Francois Bovon, Ann Brock, Constance Buchanan, Robert Funk, Anne McGuire, Elaine Pagels, Hans-Martin Schenke, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. I offer yet again my gratitude to Tom Hall, whose generous labor saved me from numerous grammatical infelicities and taught me salutory lessons along the way. My warm thanks, too, to Daryl Schmidt and Hershey Julien for their careful corrections of the final manuscript, and to Char Matejovsky for her

professionalism and consistently good advice. My most profound thanks belong to Hal Taussig who read the manuscript in multiple versions, providing both critical response and encouragement when I needed them most. I would like to dedicate this book to him as an indication of my heart-felt gratitude for his friendship.

Abbreviations & Sigla

Abbreviations

ABD	*The Anchor Bible Dictionary.* Ed. David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
Acts	*Acts of the Apostles*
AgHer	Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*
ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* 10 vols. Ed. A. Cleveland Coxe. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, reprint 1979.
ApJas	*Apocryphon of James*
ApJohn	*Apocryphon of John*
1ApocJas	*First Apocalypse of James*
2ApocJas	*Second Apocalypse of James*
ApocPaul	*Apocalypse of Paul*
ApocPet	*Apocalypse of Peter*
BCE	Before the Common Era
BG	Berlin Codex (Berolinensis Gnosticus)
BkThom	*Book of Thomas the Contender*
CE	Common Era
Col	*Colossians*
1 Cor	*First Corinthians*
2 Cor	*Second Corinthians*
Deut	*Deuteronomy*
Did	*Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Didache)*
DSav	*Dialogue of the Savior*
Eph	*Ephesians*
Gal	*Galatians*
GMary	*Gospel of Mary*
GNaz	*Gospel of the Nazarenes*
GPet	*Gospel of Peter*
GPhil	*Gospel of Philip*

GSav	*Gospel of the Savior*
GThom	*Gospel of Thomas*
GTruth	*Gospel of Truth*
HistEccl	*History of the Church*
Jas	*James*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
John	*Gospel of John*
Luke	*Gospel of Luke*
Mark	*Gospel of Mark*
Matt	*Gospel of Matthew*
NHC	*Nag Hammadi Codex*
NHLE	*The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* 3rd ed. Ed. James M. Robinson and Richard Smith. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Od	*Odyssey*
OrigWorld	*On the Origin of the World*
PetPhil	*The Letter of Peter to Philip*
1 Pet	*First Peter*
2 Pet	*Second Peter*
POxy	Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525
Prov	*Proverbs*
PRyl	Papyrus Rylands 463
PiSo	*Pistis Sophia*
Q	*Synoptic Sayings Source (Quelle)*
Rev	*Revelation*
Rom	*Romans*
SoJsChr	*Sophia of Jesus Christ*
TestTruth	*Testimony of Truth*
1 Tim	*First Timothy*
2 Tim	*Second Timothy*
Wis	*Wisdom of Solomon*

Sigla

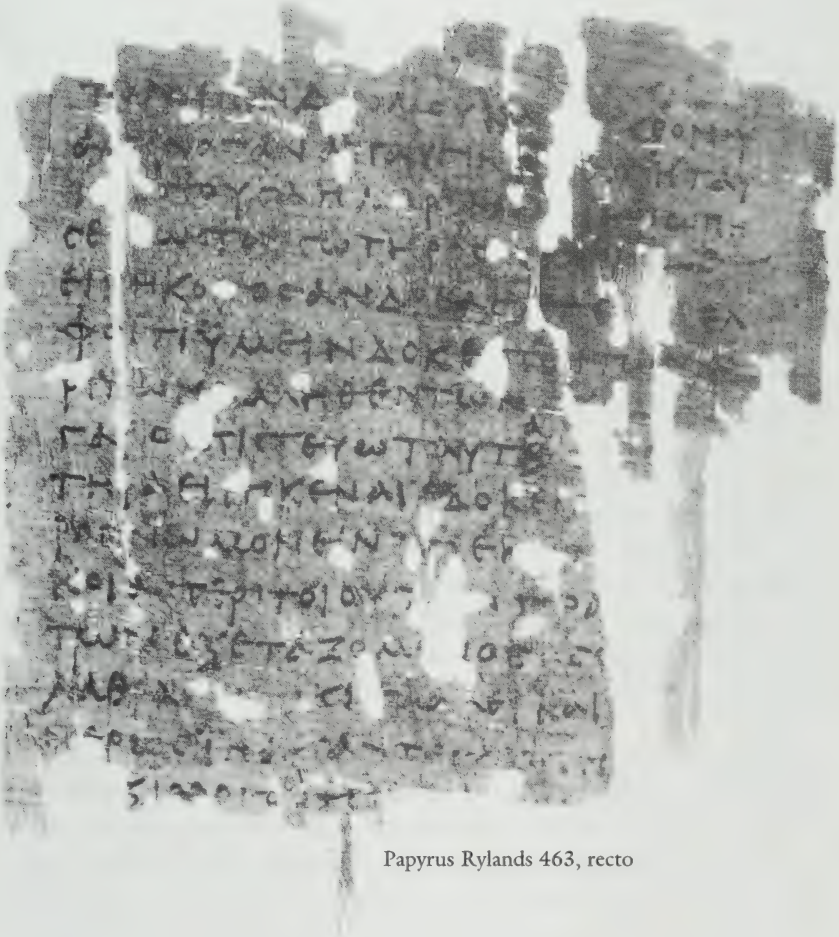
[ ] Square brackets in the translation indicate that a lacuna exists in the manuscript where writing once existed; the enclosed text has been restored by scholars.

( ) Parentheses in the translation indicate material supplied by the translator for the sake of clarity.

< > Pointed brackets indicate a correction of a scribal omission or error.

Part I

The Gospel of Mary



Papyrus Rylands 463, recto

Chapter 1

Introduction

Early Christianity & the Gospel of Mary

Few people today are acquainted with the *Gospel of Mary*. Written early in the second century CE, it disappeared for over fifteen hundred years until a single, fragmentary copy in Coptic translation came to light in the late nineteenth century. Although details of the discovery itself are obscure, we do know that the fifth-century manuscript in which it was inscribed was purchased in Cairo by Carl Reinhardt and brought to Berlin in 1896.[1] Two additional fragments in Greek have come to light in the twentieth century. Yet still no complete copy of the *Gospel of Mary* is known. Fewer than eight pages of the ancient papyrus text survive, which means that about half of the *Gospel of Mary* is lost to us, perhaps forever.

Yet these scant pages provide an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years. This astonishingly brief narrative presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is—a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of

spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority. All written in the name of a woman.

The story of the *Gospel of Mary* is a simple one. Since the first six pages are lost, the gospel opens in the middle of a scene portraying a discussion between the Savior and his disciples set after the resurrection. The Savior is answering their questions about the end of the material world and the nature of sin. He teaches them that at present all things, whether material or spiritual, are interwoven with each other. In the end, that will not be so. Each nature will return to its own root, its own original state and destiny. But meanwhile, the nature of sin is tied to the nature of life in this mixed world. People sin because they do not recognize their own spiritual nature and, instead, love the lower nature that deceives them and leads to disease and death. Salvation is achieved by discovering within oneself the true spiritual nature of humanity and overcoming the deceptive entrapments of the bodily passions and the world. The Savior concludes this teaching with a warning against those who would delude the disciples into following some heroic leader or a set of rules and laws. Instead they are to seek the child of true Humanity within themselves and gain inward peace. After commissioning them to go forth and preach the gospel, the Savior departs.

But the disciples do not go out joyfully to preach the gospel; instead controversy erupts. All the disciples except Mary have failed to comprehend the Savior's teaching. Rather than seek peace within, they are distraught, frightened that if they follow his commission to preach the gospel, they might share his agonizing fate. Mary steps in and comforts them and, at Peter's request, relates teaching unknown to them that she had received from the Savior in a vision. The Savior had explained to her the nature of prophecy and the rise of the soul to its final rest, describing how to win the battle against the wicked, illegitimate Powers that seek to keep the soul entrapped in the world and ignorant of its true spiritual nature.

But as she finishes her account, two of the disciples quite unexpectedly challenge her. Andrew objects that her teaching is strange and he refuses to believe that it came from the Savior. Peter goes further, denying that Jesus would ever have given this kind of advanced teaching to a woman, or that Jesus could possibly have preferred her to them. Apparently when he asked her to speak, Peter had not expected such elevated teaching, and now he questions her character,

implying that she has lied about having received special teaching in order to increase her stature among the disciples. Severely taken aback, Mary begins to cry at Peter's accusation. Levi comes quickly to her defense, pointing out to Peter that he is a notorious hothead and now he is treating Mary as though she were the enemy. We should be ashamed of ourselves, he admonishes them all; instead of arguing among ourselves, we should go out and preach the gospel as the Savior commanded us.

The story ends here, but the controversy is far from resolved. Andrew and Peter at least, and likely the other fearful disciples as well, have not understood the Savior's teaching and are offended by Jesus' apparent preference of a woman over them. Their limited understanding and false pride make it impossible for them to comprehend the truth of the Savior's teaching. The reader must both wonder and worry what kind of gospel such proud and ignorant disciples will preach.

How are we to understand this story? It is at once reminiscent of the New Testament gospels and yet clearly different from them. The gospel's characters—the Savior, Mary, Peter, Andrew, and Levi—are familiar to those acquainted with the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. So, too, is the theological language of gospel and kingdom, as well as such sayings of Jesus as "Those who seek will find" or "Anyone with two ears should listen." And the New Testament gospels and *Acts* repeatedly mention the appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection. Yet it is also clear that the story of the *Gospel of Mary* differs in significant respects. For example, after Jesus commissions the disciples they do not go out joyfully to preach the gospel, as they do in *Matthew*; instead they weep, fearing for their lives. Some of the teachings also seem shocking coming from Jesus, especially his assertion that there is no such thing as sin. Modern readers may well find themselves sympathizing with Andrew's assessment that "these teachings are strange ideas."

The *Gospel of Mary* was written when Christianity, still in its nascent stages, was made up of communities widely dispersed around the Eastern Mediterranean, communities which were often relatively isolated from one other and probably each small enough to meet in someone's home without attracting too much notice. Although writings appeared early—especially letters addressing the concerns of local churches, collections containing Jesus' sayings, and narratives interpreting his death and resurrection—oral practices dominated the lives

of early Christians. Preaching, teaching, and rituals of table fellowship and baptism were the core of the Christian experience.[2] What written documents they had served at most as supplemental guides to preaching and practice. Nor can we assume that the various churches all possessed the same documents; after all, these are the people who wrote the first Christian literature. Christoph Markschies suggests that we have lost 85% of Christian literature from the first two centuries–and that includes only the literature we know about.[3] Surely there must be even more, for the discovery of texts like the *Gospel of Mary* came as a complete surprise. We have to be careful that we don't suppose it is possible to reconstruct the whole of early Christian history and practice out of the few surviving texts that remain. Our picture will always be partial—not only because so much is lost, but because early Christian practices were so little tied to durable writing.

Partly as a consequence of their independent development and differing situations, these churches sometimes diverged widely in their perspectives on essential elements of Christian belief and practice. Such basic issues as the content and meaning of Jesus' teachings, the nature of salvation, the value of prophetic authority, and the roles of women and slaves came under intense debate. Early Christians proposed and experimented with competing visions of ideal community.

It is important to remember, too, that these first Christians had no New Testament, no Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed, no commonly established church order or chain of authority, no church buildings, and indeed no single understanding of Jesus. All of the elements we might consider to be essential to define Christianity did not yet exist. Far from being starting points, the Nicene creed and the New Testament were the end products of these debates and disputes; they represent the distillation of experience and experimentation—and not a small amount of strife and struggle.

All early Christian literature bears traces of these controversies. The earliest surviving documents of Christianity, the letters of Paul,[4] show that considerable difference of opinion existed about such issues as circumcision and the Jewish food laws[5] or the relative value of spiritual gifts.[6] These and other such contentious issues as whether the resurrection was physical or spiritual were stimulating theological conversations and causing rifts within and among Christian groups. By the time of the *Gospel of Mary*, these discussions were becoming increasingly nuanced and more polarized.

History, as we know, is written by the winners. In the case of early

Christianity, this has meant that many voices in these debates were silenced through repression or neglect. The *Gospel of Mary*, along with other newly discovered works from the earliest Christian period, increases our knowledge of the enormous diversity and dynamic character of the processes by which Christianity was shaped. The goal of this volume is to let twenty-first-century readers hear one of those voices—not in order to drown out the voices of canon and tradition, but in order that they might be heard with the greater clarity that comes with a broadened historical perspective. Whether or not the message of the *Gospel of Mary* should be embraced is a matter readers will decide for themselves.

Discovery and Publication

Where did the *Gospel of Mary* come from?

Over a hundred years ago, in January of 1896, a seemingly insignificant event took place on the antiquities market in Cairo. A manuscript dealer, whose name history has forgotten, offered a papyrus book for sale to a German scholar named Dr. Carl Reinhardt.[7] It eventually became clear that the book was a fifth-century CE papyrus codex, written in the Coptic language (see Box 1). Unbeknownst to either of them, it contained the *Gospel of Mary* along with three other previously unknown works, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Act of Peter*.[8] This seemingly small event turned out to be of enormous significance.

Dr. Reinhardt could tell that the book was ancient, but he knew nothing more about the find than that the dealer was from Achmim in central Egypt (see map of Egypt, p. 12). The dealer told him that a peasant had found the book in a niche of a wall,[9] but that is impossible. The book's excellent condition, except for several pages missing from the *Gospel of Mary*, makes it entirely unlikely that it had spent the last fifteen hundred years unnoticed in a wall niche. No book could have survived so long in the open air. It may be that the peasant or the dealer had come by it illegally and, hence, was evasive about the actual location of the find. Or it may have been only recently placed in the wall and accidentally found there. In any case, we still don't know anything specific about where it lay hidden all those centuries, although the first editor, Carl Schmidt, assumed that it had to have been found in the graveyards of Achmim or in the area surrounding the city.[10]

Box 1 COPTIC LANGUAGE

Although the *Gospel of Mary* was originally composed in Greek, most of it survives only in Coptic translation. Coptic is the last stage of the Egyptian language and is still in liturgical use by Egyptian Christians, called Copts. The oldest known Egyptian language was written in hieroglyphs, always on stone or some other durable material. In addition, Egyptians also wrote on papyrus, and for this they used a different script called hieratic, employed almost solely for writing sacred literature. A third script, called demotic, was developed for everyday transactions like letter-writing and book-keeping. Each of these scripts is very cumbersome, utilizing different characters or signs to represent whole syllables, not just individual sounds as in English. Sometime during the late Roman period, probably around the second century CE, scribes started writing the Egyptian language in primarily Greek letters, but adding a few from demotic Egyptian. This process made writing Egyptian much simpler and more efficient. Since Coptic script was used almost exclusively by Christians in Egypt, we can assume that Egyptian Christians were the ones who translated and preserved the *Gospel of Mary*.

Dr. Reinhardt purchased the book and took it to Berlin, where it was placed in the Egyptian Museum with the official title and catalogue number of Codex Berolinensis 8502. There it came into the hands of the Egyptologist Carl Schmidt, who set about producing a critical edition and German translation of what is now generally referred to as the Berlin Codex (see Box 2).

From the beginning, the publication was plagued by difficulties. First of all, there is the problem of the missing pages. The first six pages,[11] plus four additional pages from the middle of the work, are missing. This means that over half of the *Gospel of Mary* is completely lost. What happened to these pages? Carl Schmidt thought they must have been stolen or destroyed by whoever found the book. The manuscript itself was found protected inside its original leather and papyrus cover (see photo, p. ii),[12] but by the time it reached Carl Schmidt in Berlin, the order of the pages had been considerably jumbled.[13] It took

Box 2 THE BERLIN CODEX

The book Reinhardt bought in Cairo in 1896 turned out to be a fifth-century papyrus codex. Papyrus was the most common writing material of the day, but codices, the precursor of our book form, had come into use only a couple of centuries earlier, primarily among Christians. The codex was made by cutting papyrus rolls into sheets, which then were stacked in a single pile, usually made up of at least 38 sheets. Folding the pile in half and sewing the sheets together produced a book of about 152 pages, which was finally placed inside a leather cover. The *Gospel of Mary* is a short work, taking up only the first 18¼ pages of a codex that itself is relatively small in size, having leaves that measure on average only about 12.7 cm long and 10.5 cm wide. (See photos, pp. 19–27.)

Schmidt some time to realize that the book was nearly intact and must therefore have been found uninjured. In an uncharitable and perhaps even rancorous comment, Schmidt attributed the disorder of the pages to "greedy Arabs" who must also have either stolen or destroyed the missing pages,[14] but to this day nothing is known about their fate. We can only hope that they lie protected somewhere and will one day resurface.

By 1912 Schmidt's edition was ready for publication and was sent to the Prießchen Press in Leipzig. But alas! The printer was nearing completion of the final sheets when a burst water pipe destroyed the entire edition.[15] Soon thereafter Europe plunged into World War I. During the war and its aftermath, Schmidt was unable to go to Leipzig and salvage anything from the mess himself, but he did manage to resurrect the project. This time, however, his work was thwarted by his own mortality. His death on April 17, 1938, caused further delay while the edition was retrieved from his estate and sent to press.[16] At this point, another scholar was needed to see its publication through, a task that ultimately fell to Walter Till in 1941.[17]

In the meantime, in 1917 a small third-century Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* had been found in Egypt (Papyrus Rylands 463) (see Box 3). Being parallel to part of the Coptic text, it added no new passages to the *Gospel of Mary*, but it did provide a few variants and

Box 3 PAPYRUS RYLANDS 463 (PRyl)

This Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* was acquired by the Rylands Library in Manchester, England, in 1917, and published in 1938 by C. H. Roberts.[18] Like POxy 3525, it was found at Oxyrhynchus in northern Egypt, and dates to the early third century CE. It is a fragment from a codex—it has writing on both sides of the papyrus leaf—and exhibits a very clear literary script. It measures 8.7 cm wide by 10 cm long, although most fibers measure only 8.5. cm. The front of the fragment contains the conclusion of Mary's revelation and the beginning of the disciples' dispute over her teaching. After a short gap, the dispute continues on the other side of the fragment and ends with Levi leaving to announce the good news (*GMary* 9:29-10:4; 10:6-14). (See photos, pp. 1 and 35.)

additional evidence about the work's early date and its composition in Greek. Till incorporated this new evidence into his edition,[19] and by 1943, the edition was again ready to go to press. But now World War II made publication impossible.

By the time the war was over, news had reached Berlin of a major manuscript discovery in Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi. As chance would have it, copies of two of the other texts found within the Berlin Codex along with the *Gospel of Mary* (*Apocryphon of John* and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*) appeared among the new manuscripts. No new copies of *Gospel of Mary* were found at Nag Hammadi, but publication was delayed yet again as Till waited for information about the new manuscripts so that he could incorporate this new evidence into his edition of the Berlin Codex. But the wheels of scholarship grind slowly, and finally in exasperation, Till gave up. He confides to his readers:

> In the course of the twelve years during which I have labored over the texts, I often made repeated changes here and there, and that will probably continue to be the case. But at some point a man must find the courage to let the manuscript leave one's hand, even if one is convinced that there is much that is still imperfect. That is unavoidable with all human endeavors.[20]

At last in 1955, the first printed edition of the text of the *Gospel of Mary* finally appeared with a German translation.

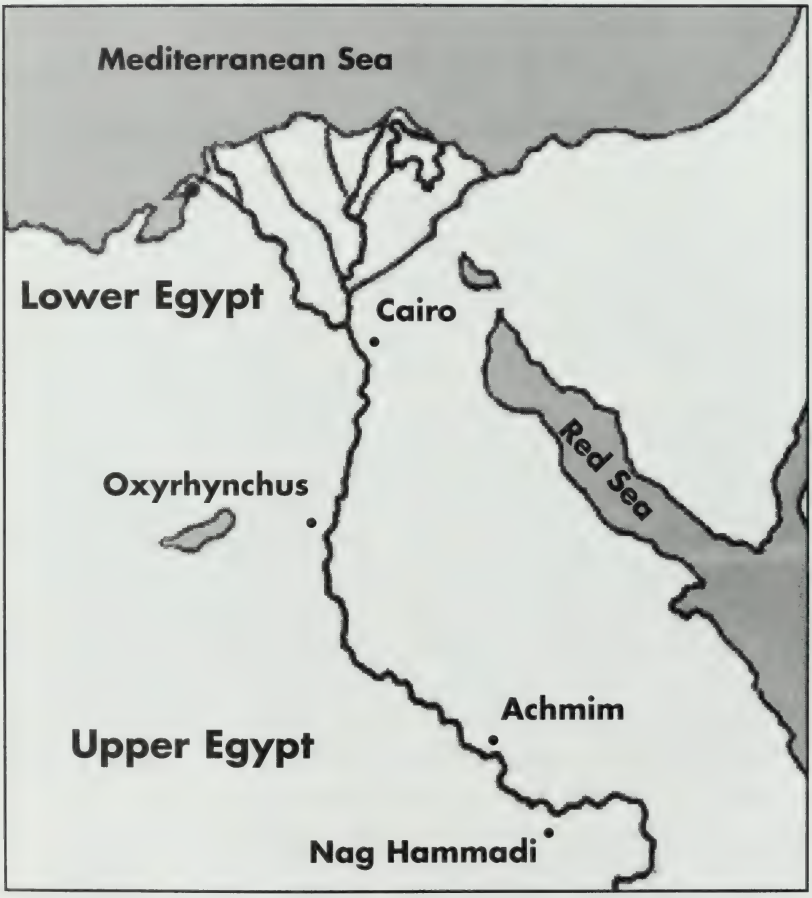
Till was right, of course; scholars continue to make changes and add to the record.[21] Of foremost importance was the discovery of yet another early third-century Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525), which was published in 1983 (see Box 4).[22] With the addition of this fragment, we now have portions of three copies of the *Gospel of Mary* dating from antiquity: two Greek manuscripts from the early third century (P. Rylands 463 and P. Oxyrhynchus 3525) and one in Coptic from the fifth century (Codex Berolinensis 8525).

Box 4 PAPYRUS OXYRHYNCHUS 3525 (POxy)

This tiny and severely damaged papyrus fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* in Greek was found during excavations of the town of Oxyrhynchus, along the Nile in lower (northern) Egypt. Published in 1983 by P. J. Parsons, it is now housed in the Ashmolean Library at Oxford.[23] It dates to the early third century CE. The fragment has writing on only one side, indicating that it came from a roll, not a codex (book). Because it was written in a cursive Greek script usually reserved for such documentary papyri as business documents and letters rather than literary texts, Parsons suggested that it was the work of an amateur. What remains is a very fragmentary fragment indeed. It contains approximately twenty lines of writing, none of them complete. The papyrus measures 11.7 cm long and is 11.4 cm at its widest point, but the top half is only about 4 cm wide. The restoration is based largely on the parallel Coptic text. It contains the Savior's farewell, Mary's comforting of the other disciples, Peter's request to Mary to teach, and the beginning of her vision (*GMary* 4:11-7:3). (See photo, pp. 91.)

Because it is unusual for several copies from such early dates to have survived, the attestation of the *Gospel of Mary* as an early Christian work is unusually strong. Most early Christian literature that we know about has survived because the texts were copied and then recopied as the materials on which they were written wore out. In

antiquity it was not necessary to burn books one wanted to suppress (although this was occasionally done); if they weren't recopied, they disappeared through neglect. As far as we know, the *Gospel of Mary* was never recopied after the fifth century; it may have been that the *Gospel of Mary* was actively suppressed, but it is also possible that it simply dropped out of circulation. Either way, whether its loss resulted from animosity or neglect, the recovery of the *Gospel of Mary*, in however fragmentary condition, is due in equal measure to phenomenal serendipity and extraordinary good fortune.



Achmim is located in central Egypt along the Nile, less than a hundred miles from the site of another important manuscript find near Nag Hammadi. Oxyrhynchus, the site of the discovery of the Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Mary*, lies far to the north.

Chapter 2

Translation

Papyrus Berolinensis 8502,1

1 *(Pages 1-6 are missing.)*

2 ***The nature of matter***

"... Will m[a]tter then be utterly [destr]oyed or not?"

[2]The Savior replied, "Every nature, every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other. [3]They will dissolve again into their own proper root. [4]For the nature of matter is dissolved into what belongs to its nature. [5]Anyone with two ears able to hear should listen!"

3 ***The nature of sin and the Good***

[1]Then Peter said to him, "You have been explaining every topic to us; tell us one other thing. [2]What is the sin of the world?"

[3]The Savior replied, "There is no such thing as sin; [4]rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin.' [5]For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature. [6]It will set it within its root."

[7]Then he continued. He said, "This is why you get si[c]k and die: [8]because [you love] what de[c]ei[ve]s [you]. [9][Anyone who] thinks should consider (these matters)!

[10]"[Ma]tter gav[e bi]rth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. [11]A disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body. [12]That is why I told you, 'Become content at heart, [13]while also remaining discontent and disobedient; indeed become contented and agreeable (only) in the presence of that other Image of nature.' [14]Anyone with two ears capable of hearing should listen!"

4 *The Savior's farewell*

[1]When the Blessed One had said these things, he greeted them all. "Peace be with you!" he said. [2]"Acquire my peace within yourselves!

[3]"Be on your guard [4]so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Look over here!' or 'Look over there!' [5]For the child of true Humanity exists within you. [6]Follow it! [7]Those who search for it will find it.

[8]"Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [9][Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, [10]nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it."

[11]After he had said these things, he departed from them.

5 *Mary comforts the other disciples*

[1]But they were distressed and wept greatly. [2]"How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity?" they said. [3]"If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?"

[4]Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, [5]"Do not weep and be distressed nor let

Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525

[11] ... having said [th]ese things, he de[parted.]

5 *Mary comforts the other disciples*

[1][But they were distressed, weeping greatly.] [2]"How [are we to] g[o to the rest of the world preaching the good] news of the Rea[lm of the child of true Humanity?" they said. [3]"For if] they [did not spare him,] how will they keep [away from] us?"

[4][Then Mary stood up and greeted] them; she tenderly kissed [them all and said, "Brothers and sisters, [5]do not

BG 8502

your hearts be irresolute. [6]For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. [7]Rather we should praise his greatness, [8]for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings."

[9]When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart [to]ward the Good, [10]and they began to deba[t]e about the wor[d]s of [the Savior].

6 *Peter asks Mary to teach.*

[1]Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. [2]Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them."

[3]Mary responded, "I will teach you about what is hidden from you." [4]And she began to speak these words to them.

7 *Vision and mind*

[1]She said, "I saw the Lord in a vision [2]and I said to him, 'Lord, I saw you today in a vision.'

[3]He answered me, 'How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me! [4]For where the mind is, there is the treasure.'

[5]I said to him, 'So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it <with> the soul <or> with the spirit?'

POxy 3525

weep, do not be dis]tressed nor be in doubt. [6][For his grace will be w]ith you sheltering you. [7]Rather [we should] praise his [great]ness, [8]for he has united us and [made (us)] true Human beings."

[9][When Ma]ry [said these things] she turned their mind to[ward the Good [10]and they began to debat]e about the sayings of the Savio[r.

6 *Peter asks Mary to teach*

[1]Peter said to] Mary, "Sister, we know that you were greatly [loved by the Sav]ior, as no other woman. [2]Therefore tell us t[hose wor]ds of the Savior which [you know] but which we haven't heard."

[3][Mary] re[plied, "I will] rep[ort to you as much as] I remember that is unknown to you." [4][And she began (to speak) the]se words [to them].

7 *Vision and mind*

[1]"When [the Lord] ap[peared] to m[e] in a vision, [2][I said], 'Lord, today [I saw y]ou.'

[3]"He replied, ['How wonderful you are … ' "]

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6The Savior answered, 'A person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. 7'Rather the mind, which exists between these two, sees the vision an[d] that is w[hat ...]'

8 *(Pages 11-14 are missing.)*

9 ***The ascent of the soul***

1" '... it.'

2"And Desire said, 'I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. 3So why do you lie since you belong to me?'

4"The soul answered, 'I saw *you*. You did not see me nor did you know me. 5You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. 6And you did not recognize me.'

7"After it had said these things, it left rejoicing greatly.

8"Again, it came to the third Power, which is called 'Ignorance.' 9[It] examined the soul closely, saying, 'Where are you going? 10You are bound by wickedness. 11Indeed you are bound! 12Do not judge!'

13"And the soul said, 'Why do you judge me, since I have not passed judgement? 14I have been bound, but I have not bound (anything). 15They did not recognize me, but I have recognized that the universe is to be dissolved, both the things of earth and those of heaven.'

16"When the soul had brought the third Power to naught, it went upward and saw the fourth Power. 17It had seven forms. 18The first form is darkness; 19the second is desire; 20the third is ignorance; 21the fourth is zeal for death; 22the fifth is the realm of the flesh; 23the sixth is the foolish wisdom of the flesh; 24the seventh is the wisdom of the wrathful person. 25These are the seven Powers of Wrath.

26"They interrogated the soul, 'Where are you coming from, human-killer, and where are you going, space-conqueror?'

27"The soul replied, saying, 'What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been destroyed, and my desire has been brought to an end, and ignorance has died. 28In a [wor]ld, I was set loose from a world [an]d in a type,
from a type which is above, and
(from) the chain of forgetfulness which exists in time. 29From this hour on, for the time of the due season of the aeon, I will receive rest i[n] silence.' "

Papyrus Rylands 463 (PRyl)

29" '... for the rest of the course of the [due] measure of the time of the aeon, I will rest i[n] silence.' "

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[30]After Mary had said these things, she was silent, [31]since it was up to this point that the Savior had spoken to her.

10 *The disciples' dispute over Mary's teaching*

[1]Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, "Say what you will about the things she has said, [2]but I do not believe that the S[a]vior said these things, f[or] indeed these teachings are strange ideas."

[3]Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? [4]Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?"

[5]Then [M]ary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what are you imagining? [6]Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Savior?"

[7]Levi answered, speaking to Peter, "Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. [8]Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. [9]For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her? [10]Assuredly the Savior's knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us.

[11]"Rather we should be

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[30]After she had said these [words], Mary was sile[n]t, [31]for the Savior had spoken up to this point.

10 *The disciples' dispute over Mary's teaching*

[1]Andrew sai[d, "B]rothers, what is your opinion of what was just said? [2]Indeed I do not believe that the S[a]vior said these things, for what she said appears to give views that are [dif]ferent from h[is th]ought."

[3]After examining these ma[tt]ers, <Peter said>, "Has the Sa[vior] spoken secretly to a wo[m]an and <not> openly so that [we] would all hear? [4][Surely] he did[not want to show] that [she] is more worthy than we are?" ...

[6]"... about the Savior."

[7]Levi said to Peter, "Peter, you are al[ways] rea[dy] to give way to you[r] perpetual inclination to anger. [8]And even now you are doing exactly that by questioning the woman as though you're her adversary. [9]If the Savio[r] considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? [10]For he knew her completely (and) loved her stea[df]ast[ly].

[11]"Rath[e]r [we] should be ashamed and, once we have clothed [ou]rselves with the

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ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, [12]and announce the good news, [13]not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said."

[14]After [he had said these] things, they started going out [to] teach and to preach.

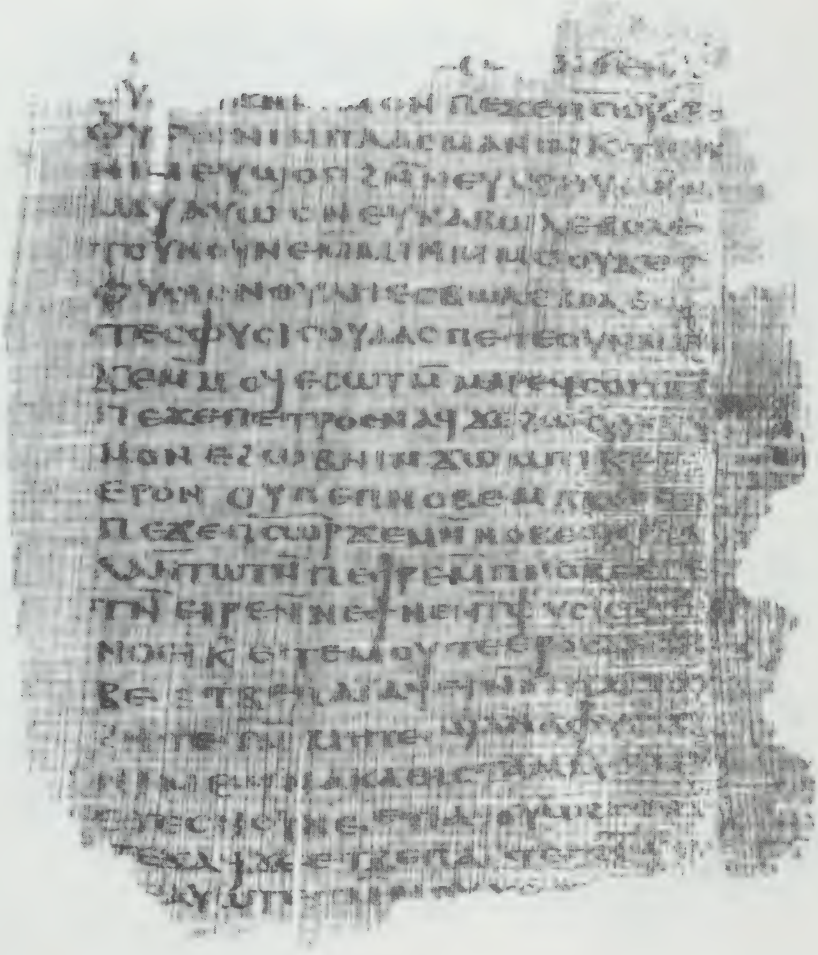
[15][The Gos]pel according to Mary

PRyl 463

p[erfec]t Human, we should do what [w]e were commanded. [12][We] should announce [the] good n[e]ws as [the] Savior sai[d], [13]and not be la[y]ing down any rules or maki[n]g laws."

[14]After he had said [the]se things, Le[vi] le[ft] (and) began to anno[unce the good ne]ws.

[15][The Gospel according to Mary]



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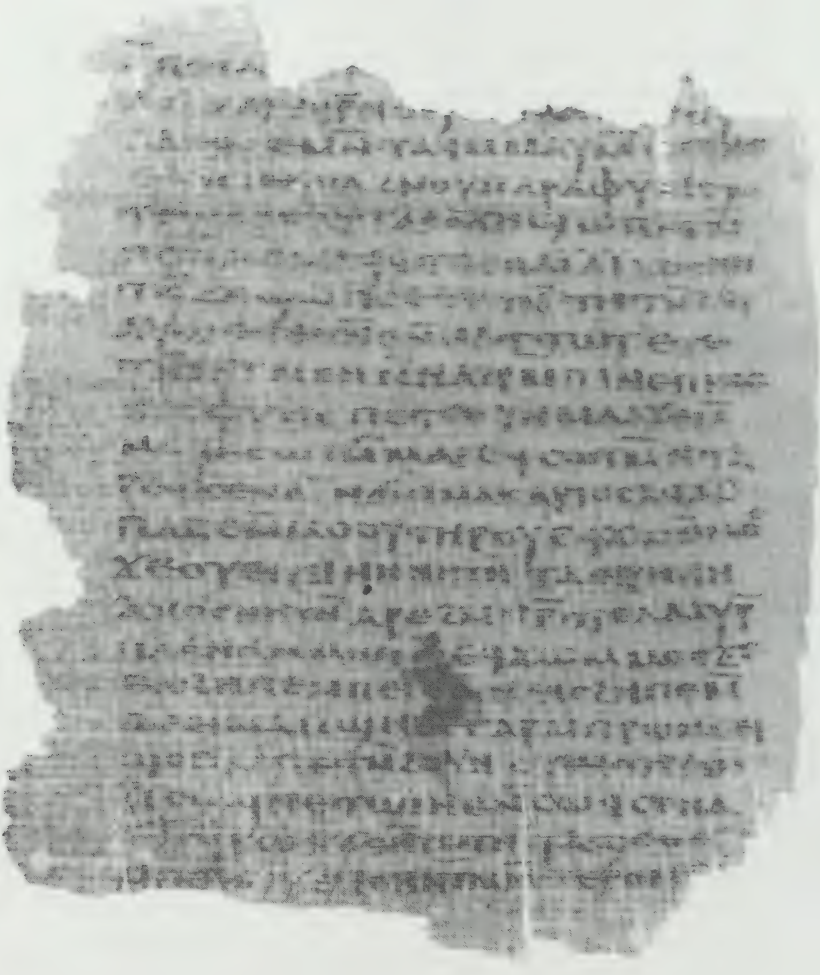

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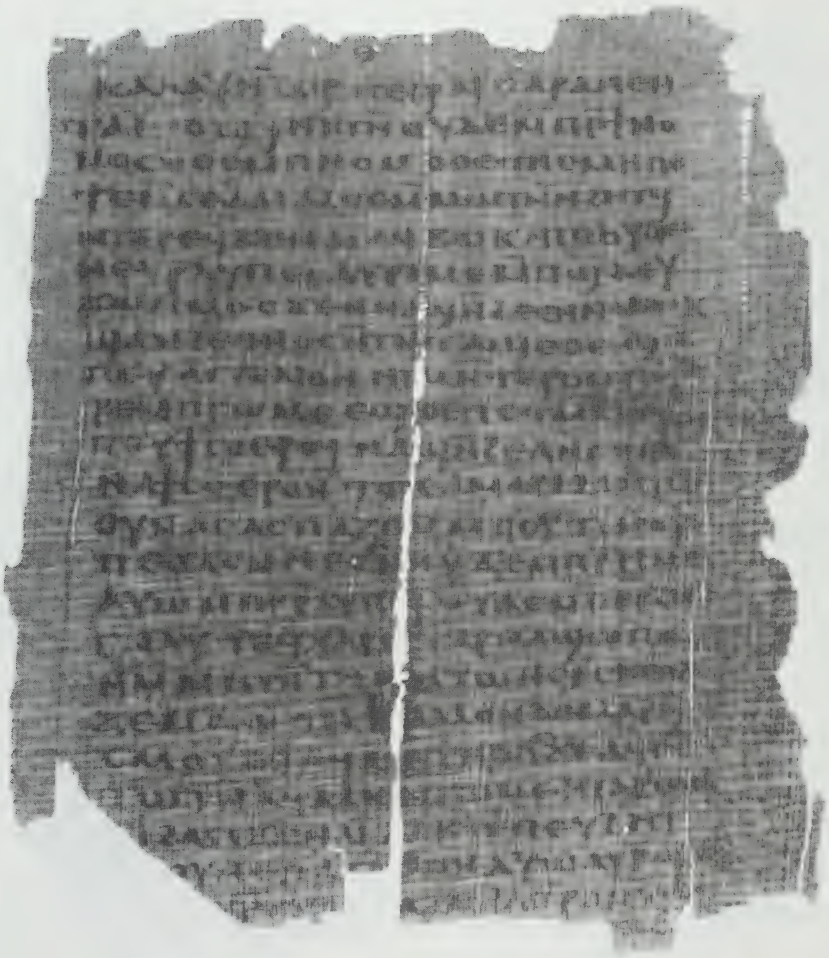

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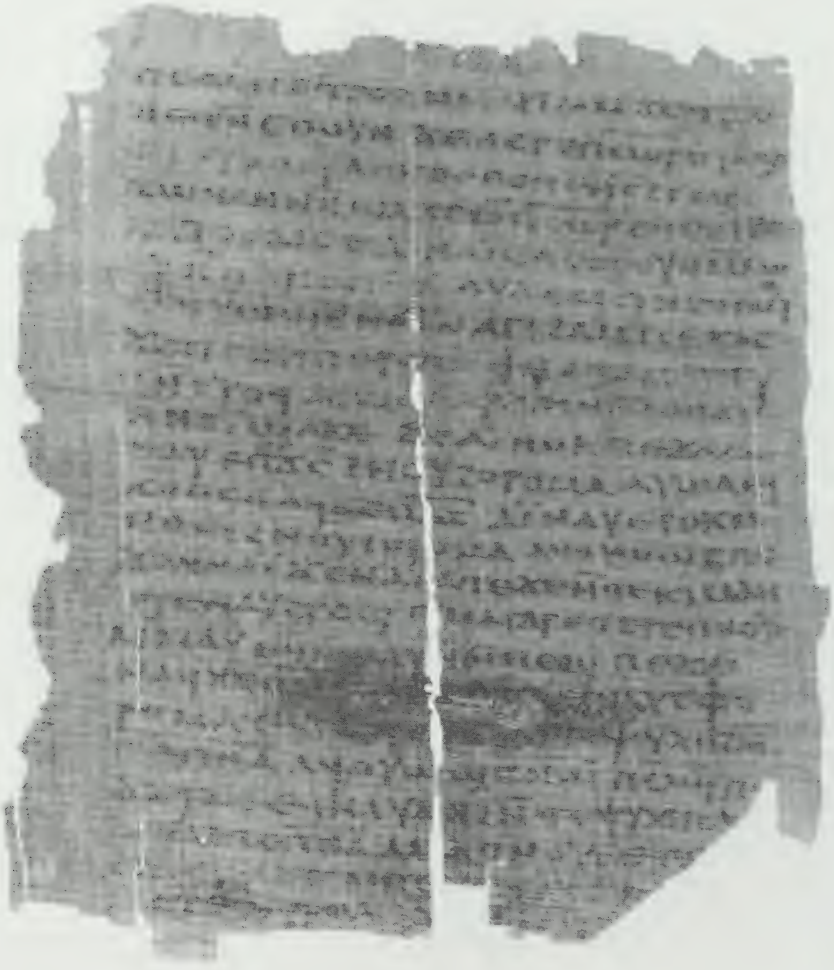

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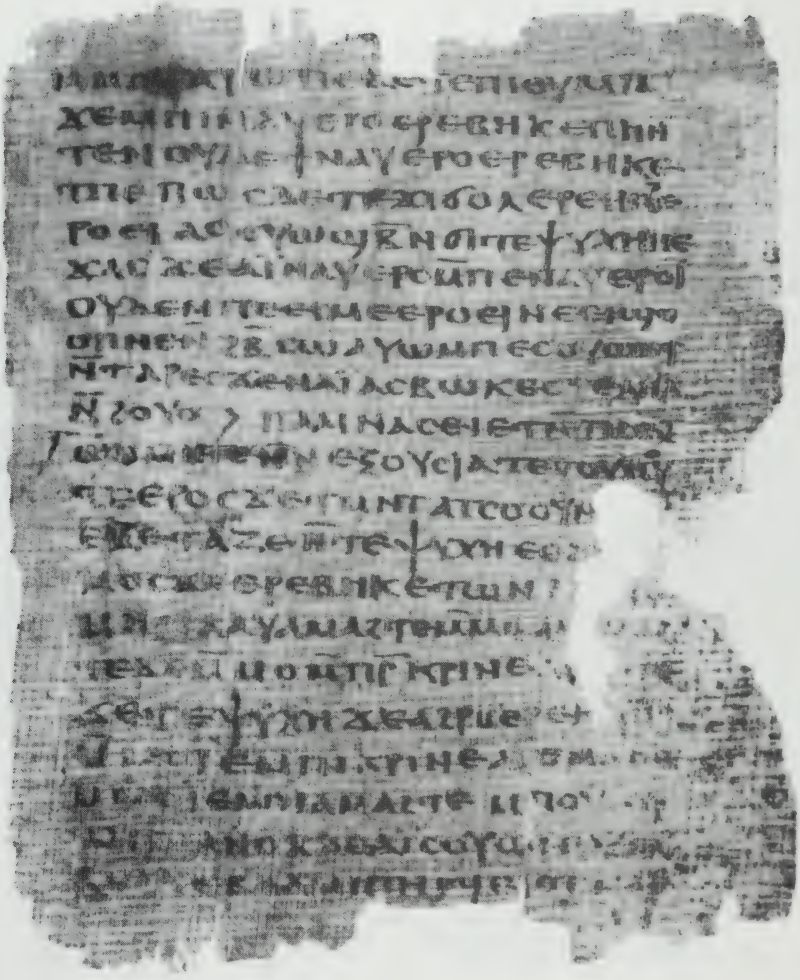

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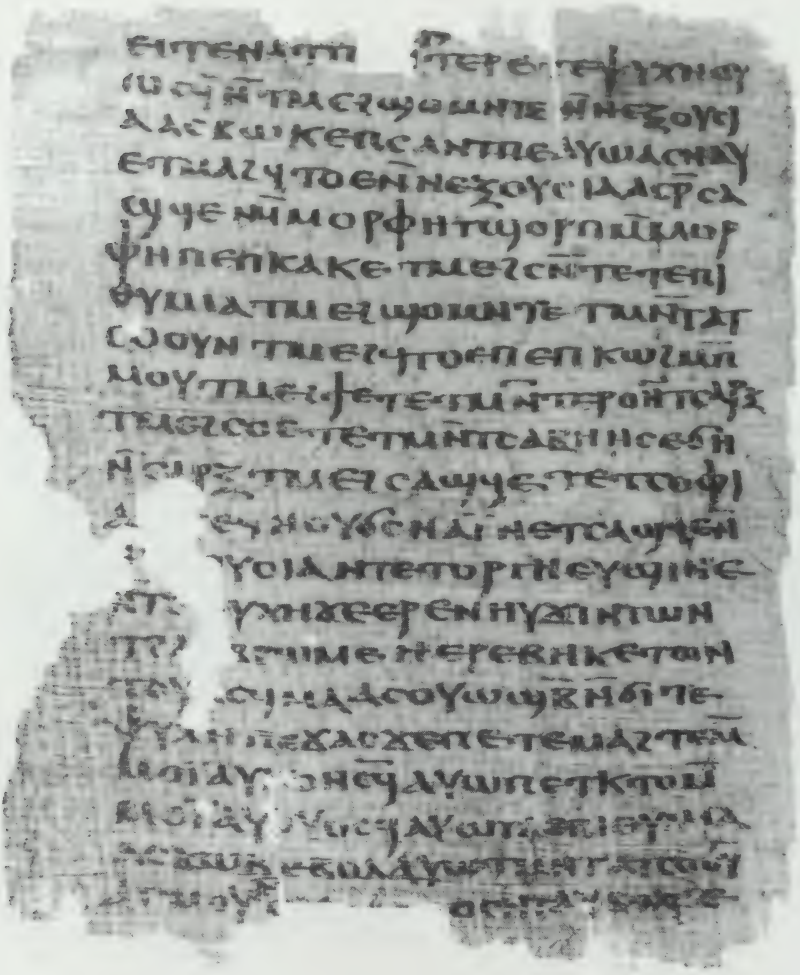

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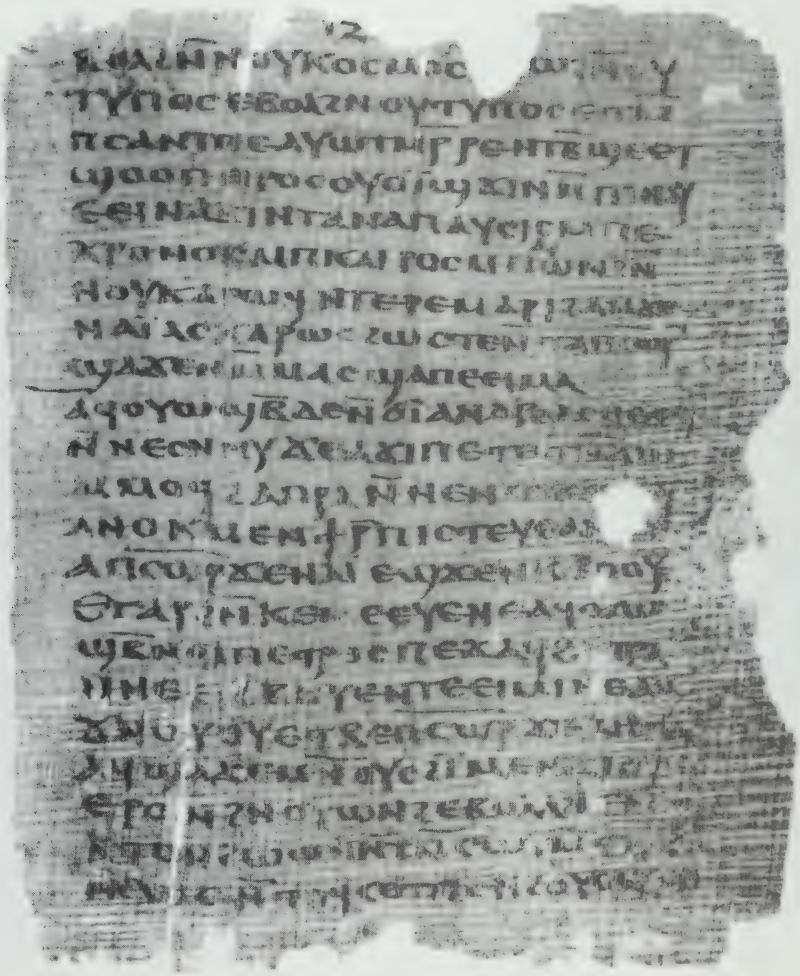

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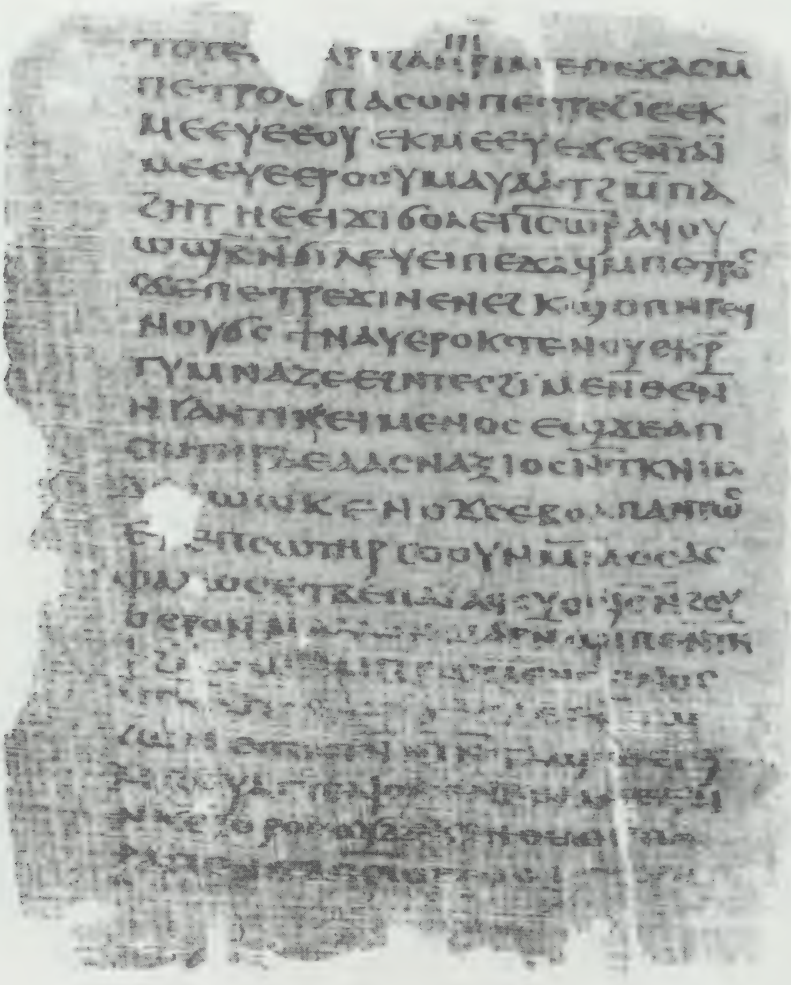

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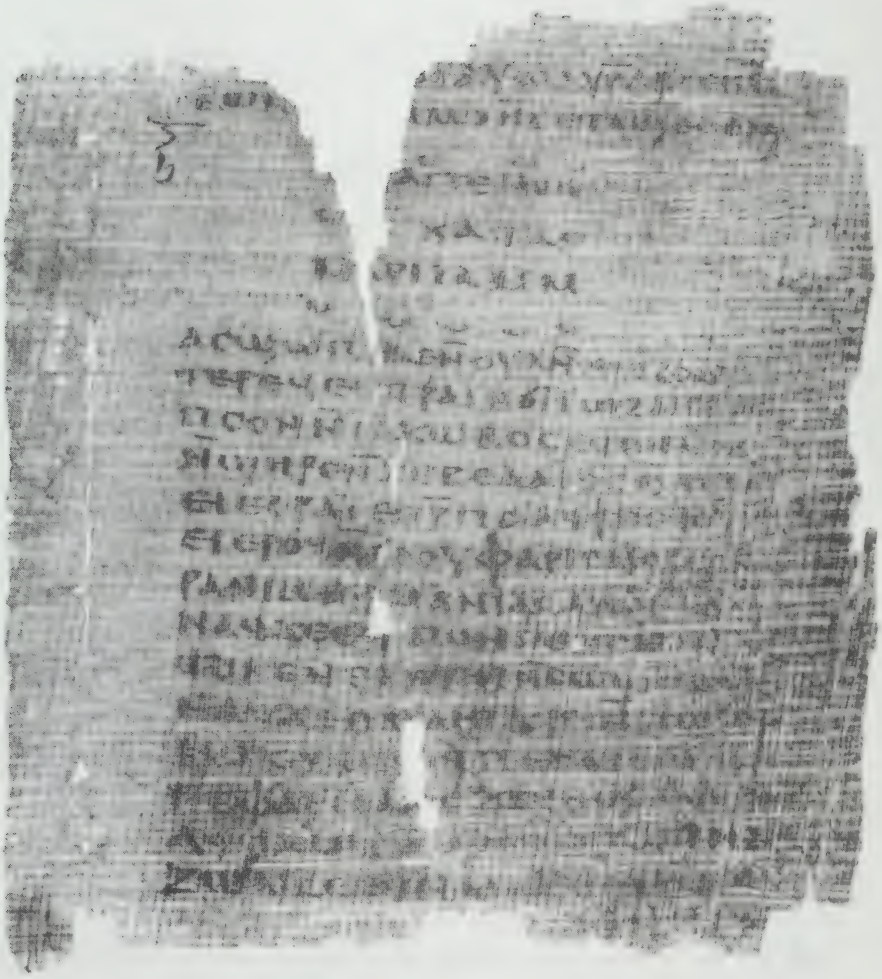

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Chapter 3

Gospel, Revelation, Dialogue

Since the first six manuscript pages of the Berlin Codex, constituting approximately one third of the text, are missing, and no Greek fragments of this portion of the text exist, we are left ignorant of how the work actually begins. The first surviving page opens in the middle of a discussion between the Savior and his disciples. However, both the commissioning scene (4:8–10) and the reference to the death of the Savior (5:3) which appear later in the text indicate that the setting is a post-resurrection appearance of the Savior to his disciples.[1] Indeed, all the commissioning scenes from the New Testament gospel literature occur after the resurrection.[2] The disciples in the *Gospel of Mary* must already know about the Savior's death, since they fear that they might suffer the same fate.

Post-resurrection appearances are found in all four of the New Testament gospels and *Acts*, as well as many other early Christian writings such as *First Apocalypse of James* and *Dialogue of the Savior*.[3] While they function to substantiate the reality of Jesus' resurrection, these appearances portray the post-resurrection period primarily as a time when Jesus gave special teaching[4] and commissioned disciples to go forth and preach the gospel.[5] Post-resurrection scenes typically include at least some of the following elements: the appearance of the risen

Lord, rebuke of fearful or grieving disciples, the association of special teaching with the risen Lord, the disciples as the recipients of the teaching, the mention of opponents, persecution for holding secret teaching, and a commissioning scene.[6] All of these elements are found in the *Gospel of Mary*, although it is focused heavily upon presenting the Savior's teaching, whether in his own words or through Mary's account of the revelation to her.

The title appended to the text identifies this book as a "gospel," a term commonly associated with a story of Jesus' life and teaching. But for the earliest Christians it meant not so much a biographical account as the "good news" of the kingdom[7]; it indicated the message and promise of the Savior, not the genre of the work. Indeed, the *Gospel of Mary* better fits the formal conventions of a post-resurrection dialogue.[8] It is structured as a series of dialogues and departures: 1) the dialogue between the Savior and the disciples, followed by the Savior's departure; 2) the dialogue among the disciples, followed by their departure (or at least Levi's departure) to preach the gospel; 3) the dialogue between the Savior and Mary, ending in her silence; and 4) the dialogues between the soul and the Powers, culminating in the soul's departure from the world to its final resting place.

These dialogues not only communicate the content of the *Gospel of Mary*, but they also emphasize the dialogical character of its teaching and their messages are amplified by the work's structure. For example, the structural similarity between the two main dialogues (1 and 2) authorizes Mary's teaching and her leadership role by placing her in a position parallel to that of the Savior: it is she who steps into the Savior's place by turning the other disciples toward the Good and providing them with advanced spiritual instruction. Moreover, while the first dialogue stands alone, the other three dialogues are embedded within one another, creating an ordered layering of teaching that draws the reader deeper and deeper inward. In the outer layer of the dialogue, the disciples are fearful and contentious, mistakenly concerned with the survival of their physical shells and jealous of their standing in the group. The next layer models the true disciple: Mary's complete comprehension of the Savior's teaching is signaled by her stability, her capacity to comfort and teach the Savior's words, and ultimately by her restful silence. The final and innermost layer of the dialogues takes place between the soul and the Powers, circling inward and upward toward the triumphal journey of the soul out of darkness and ignorance to exuberant joy and eternal rest. Both the content and

the configuration lead the reader *inward* toward the stability, power, and freedom of the true self, the soul set free from the false powers of ignorance, passion, and death. In this way, the structure of the *Gospel of Mary* reproduces the same message as the Savior's teaching: "Acquire my peace *within yourselves*!... For the child of true Humanity exists *within you*. Follow it! Those who seek for it will find it."[9]

The repeated motif of departure also binds together content and structure, conveying the message that understanding requires a change of situation and action. The Savior's departure signals the eventual departure of the disciples, such that going out to preach the gospel becomes a step on the soul's journey to the Divine. The hearers are not to remain in this world, but are to follow the path of the Savior in preaching the gospel even as they are to follow the child of true Humanity within, the path forged by the soul in overcoming the Powers in the ascent to the Good. The repetition of the commission to preach, once at the end of the first dialogue and again at the conclusion of the gospel, functions formally to tie the Savior's departure to the disciples' mission to preach. Preaching the gospel is the direct consequence of understanding the Savior's message.

Throughout the journey of the soul toward comprehension, dialogue is key. The model for this dialogue is the ancient ideal of a pedagogical relationship in which the teacher's words and acts comprise a model to which the disciple ought to conform. Ancient culture was deeply suspicious of writing if it became detached from this intimate model, and Christians very early transformed this widespread ideal by understanding Jesus—not Scripture—as the truest revelation of God. As the second century theologian Irenaeus of Lyon argued, the incarnation of Jesus made God visible, so that by "becoming what we are, He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."[10] Irenaeus insisted: "We could have learned in no other way than by seeing our Teacher, and hearing His voice with our own ears, that, having become imitators of His works as well as doers of His words we may have communion with Him, receiving increase from the perfect One, and from Him who is prior to all creation."[11] For Irenaeus, both what one saw of the Lord and what one heard from him were equally to be enacted. While in many respects Irenaeus' theology differs significantly from that of the *Gospel of Mary*,[12] they agree that following the Savior requires both comprehension of his teaching and imitation of his actions. For the *Gospel of Mary*, communion with God was formed in dialogue with the Savior; the relationship between teacher and

student cultivated an accurate understanding of divine reality and a pattern for ethical behavior. The message of the dialogue form is that relationship is fundamental to salvation, both that between teacher and student and that formed among the disciples in the community of faith and in their mission.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, first the Savior and then Mary take up the role of the teacher—the Savior by answering the questions of his followers, Mary by recounting her dialogue with him. Dialogue is the primary form of instruction because it insists upon the active participation of the student. The Savior attempts to inculcate proper attitudes in his disciples—for example by warning them not to fear the dangers that lay ahead, or by praising Mary's behavior when she had a vision of him: "Blessed are you for not wavering at the sight of me!" Her stability showed that she had overcome the fear that usually accompanies the appearance of a divine being. The interaction aims not at domination by the teacher, but at bringing the student to the level of the teacher; the Savior seeks to meet the needs of the disciples and raise their level of understanding as much as possible, even to the point where they are able to succeed him. The Savior has clearly been successful in this aim with Mary, since she is able to take his place after his departure. When the disciples are distressed at the Savior's departure, Mary comforts them precisely by turning their hearts and minds toward a discussion of the Savior's words. She responds to their request for teaching not in order to put herself above them, but in order to meet their need to understand more fully.

While dialogical pedagogy does presume that the teacher's status is higher than that of the student, this difference is neither permanent nor absolute; it should wane and at last disappear as the student progresses. The disciples are to find and appropriate the truth of the Savior's teaching for themselves, at which point they will no longer need a teacher. Indeed the Savior warns them against looking for some hero to save them; they are to look within: "Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Look over here!' or 'Look over there!' For the child of true Humanity exists within you."[13] Rather than accept an external authority, they themselves are to discover the truth in order to achieve the freedom and efficacy of the undominated soul.

The Savior's teaching against illegitimate domination pervades the *Gospel of Mary*. He explicitly instructs them not to "lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, lest you be dominated by it."[14] Elaine Pagels has pointed out

that Peter's attempt to denounce Mary as a liar recalls such other attempts to silence women as that of *1 Cor* 14:34: "the women should keep silence in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, *even as the law says.*"[15] So too the Powers attempt to maintain their domination over the soul by judging and condemning it, much as in a law court. But the knowing soul resists and undermines their domination by refusing to play their game and by offering truth in the place of deception. It is true that both where Peter and Andrew challenge Mary, and where the Powers challenge the soul, the *Gospel of Mary* exposes how dialogue can foster harmful relationships as well as salutary ones. But it also offers a strategy for overcoming that harm: Speak the truth to power, call enslaving law and condemnation by their true names—deception and domination. True teaching does not deceive and dominate, it frees. Thus while dialogue by itself is not always good, it is crucial to creating proper relationships.

In the *Gospel of Mary* I tend to translate "kingdom" as "realm" precisely because the text's language itself is straining to articulate a sense of reality in which power is exerted for spiritual freedom not royal domination. So, too, the language of the "Son of Man" strains against the *Gospel of Mary*'s ideal of a nongendered space in which men and women exercise leadership based on their spiritual development and the resulting capacity to meet the needs of others. Here the phrase "Son of Man" is translated "child of true Humanity".

The dialogical form and content of the *Gospel of Mary* work together to communicate true teaching about the gospel of the Divine Realm. The soul's journey past the wicked Powers provides a narrative portrait of perfect humanity moving inward to discover the divine Good within. Here the soul, the true self, is purged of all its ignorance and attachment to the body. It is powerful and joyous. This vision of the perfected self forms the core of the text's deepest teaching. Both the content and the structure prompt the reader to look inward, toward the true self.

The form of post-resurrection dialogue also functions to authorize the *Gospel of Mary*'s teaching—even in the face of opposition—by attributing it to revelation. Here again form, function, and content work together. Many early Christian writings indicate that teachings received through appearances or visions of the risen Savior were considered to have a special validity. Already in *Galatians*, for example, it is clear that Paul considers the teaching that he received in a

revelation of Jesus Christ to be more trustworthy than that which is passed on by mere humans.[16] Similarly, the authority of *Revelation* derives from its claim to record "the revelation of Jesus Christ" given to John.[17] The post-resurrection setting of the *Gospel of Mary* similarly functions to authorize its teaching.

By showing that Mary takes over important functions of the Savior, especially in comforting the disciples and providing them with special teaching, the *Gospel of Mary* associates opposition to Mary with opposition to the Savior. Those who oppose her oppose the Savior, and are on the side of the Powers who fight against the soul's escape. And having grounded its teaching on the authority of the Savior, the *Gospel of Mary* situates that teaching within the context of inter-Christian debate about salvation, the nature of sin and the world, the fate of the soul, the reliability of apostolic authority, and the question of women's leadership roles.

Part II

The Savior's Teaching in the Gospel of Mary

Papyrus Rylands 463, verso

Chapter 4

The Body & the World

The Savior's teaching makes up the substantial core of the *Gospel of Mary*, and Jesus is the central figure in salvation. He is called the Lord and Savior, and his teaching holds the key to eternal life with God. But the interpretation of that teaching in the *Gospel of Mary* differs radically from other common understandings. While it affirms the death and resurrection of Jesus, these events are not the core of Christian belief but rather the occasion for the disciples' mission to preach the gospel. The *Gospel of Mary* focuses instead on Jesus as a teacher and mediator of divine revelation. The Savior teaches that at death, the human body dissolves into the elements out of which it came; only the spiritual soul is immortal and lives forever. This knowledge leads people to discover the truth about themselves—that they are spiritual beings made in the Image of God—and it allows them to overcome the worldly attachments and bodily passions that lead to suffering and death. Therefore the final goal of salvation is not the resurrection of the body at the end of the age, but the ascent of the soul to God—both in this life by following the Savior's teaching, and at death when the bonds between the body and the soul are loosened beyond time and eternity. There is no hell and no eternal punishment in the *Gospel of Mary*'s teachings, for God is not conceived as a wrath-

ful ruler or judge, but is called simply the Good. Nor is God called Father, for gender, sexuality, and the social roles ascribed to them are part of the lower material realm. Even the true spiritual nature of human beings is non-gendered, so that people are truly neither male nor female, but simply Human in accordance with the divine Image of the transcendent Good. Moral effort is centered on inner spiritual transformation, not on sin and judgment. Service to others is primarily understood as teaching people to follow the words of the Savior and preaching the gospel of the Divine Realm. The establishment of excessive laws and rules within the Christian community is understood as a tool for domination and is unnecessary for proper order.

These teachings were no doubt shaped not only in conversation and controversy with other Christians, but also, as we will see, in the crucibles of ancient intellectual and social life among the diverse societies under Roman imperial rule. While Jesus and most of his earliest followers were Jews, Christianity quickly spread around the edges of the Eastern Mediterranean, from Rome to Egypt, garnering Gentile followers as well as Jews living outside of Judaea/Palestine. The earliest extant Christian literature, the letters of Paul, documents the spread of Christianity through Asia Minor to the imperial capital of Rome itself during the first decades after the death of Jesus in Jerusalem. When Gentiles encountered the teachings of Jesus, many of the earlier connections to Jewish faith and practice receded, while the belief systems and world views of the new Gentile Christians brought other issues to the fore. Tensions over whether Gentiles who accepted Jesus needed to be circumcised or follow dietary laws gave way to other concerns. Some elements already in the Jesus tradition became more prominent, especially when they intersected with philosophical speculation and popular pieties. The *Gospel of Mary* provides one example of these kinds of Christianity.

The *Gospel of Mary* presents many familiar sayings of Jesus, but they are interpreted in a framework that may seem foreign to modern readers used to reading the literature of the New Testament as part two of the Bible, following the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. Interpreting the life and deeds of Jesus and his followers as the fulfillment of Hebrew Scriptures was crucial to early Christian claims that faith in Christ had superseded Judaism and indeed that Christians were the true Israel. By the fourth and fifth centuries this perspective was able to claim the name of orthodoxy for itself and

condemn other views as heretical. In contrast, the theology of the *Gospel of Mary* shows almost no ties to Judaism since it developed out of the thought world of Gentile philosophy.

Yet the fact is that determining the proper relationship to Judaism became the single most important factor in distinguishing orthodoxy from heresy in the early period. Scholars themselves have been so influenced by the dominant orthodoxy that they have divided early Christianity into three basic types following this same factor. I call this the Three Bears story of Christian origins; that is perhaps somewhat flippant, but the illustration works too well not to use it. Jewish Christianity is *too much* Judaism and takes too positive an attitude toward Jewish practices like Sabbath observance and synagogue attendance. Gnosticism is *too little* Judaism or takes too negative an attitude toward Jewish scriptures and traditions. While orthodoxy is *just right*, drawing a firm line between Christians and Jews while simultaneously appropriating Jewish scripture and tradition for its own by claiming that they can be properly interpreted only in the context of their fulfillment by Christ.[1]

While this modern division of Christianity accurately reproduces the politics of normative Christian identity formation, it does not accurately describe how Christianity developed. Jewish Christianity and Gnosticism are modern inventions that have allowed scholars to categorize the diversity of early Christianities into a simple and indeed simplistic scheme, dividing the tremendous diversity of early Christianity into two basic types: orthodox and heretical. This scheme emphasizes the differences between orthodox and heretical theologies, overlooking the many similarities that existed. The real situation was much more convoluted and complex than this binary division suggests. Moreover, this scheme has allowed scholars almost effortlessly to classify the *Gospel of Mary* as a work of Gnostic heresy without looking carefully at what it is saying or striving to understand what it tells us about the development of early Christianity. One scholar even questioned whether the *Gospel of Mary* was Christian at all![2]

The old master story of the history of early Christianity is now being challenged and rewritten, primarily on the basis of newly discovered early Christian works. Not only the works from Nag Hammadi[3] and the Berlin Codex, but the *Gospel of the Savior* (recently discovered in the Berlin Egyptian Museum[4]), a new version of the *Gospel of Matthew* from the Schøyen Codex,[5] and other works not yet

published are providing new grounds and resources for rethinking the history of Christian beginnings. The *Gospel of Mary* will play an important part in forging a new story.

Historians and theologians will need to take great care in how this story is written. Because orthodoxy has made the relationship to Judaism a central focus for defining Christian identity, the impact on Jewish-Christian relations must be a vital consideration. Some would argue that a work like the *Gospel of Mary*, which presents a type of Christianity largely unaffected by ancient Judaism, could further an anti-Jewish stance within Christianity. There is, however, no evidence of anti-Judaism within the *Gospel of Mary* itself, whereas the orthodoxy that developed in the fourth and fifth centuries was supersessionist by definition, and provided a basis for the gravely problematic dogma that God had rejected the particularism and literalism of Judaism in favor of Christianity's universal salvation and allegorical interpretation of Scripture. The depictions of both Judaism and Christianity presupposed by this dogma are inaccurate stereotypes. As we know too well in the twenty-first century, this kind of Christian anti-Judaism has led to horrific anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic acts since the ascendancy of Christian hegemony under the late Roman empire. Yet as Christian theologians continue to struggle against this heritage, my hope is that a more complex and more accurate history of early Christian development will strengthen their efforts while at the same time engaging the fact that Christianity in all its early forms was shaped within the pluralistic context of Greco-Roman society. This realization is especially important since Christianity is now a world religion. Most Christians today live outside of Europe and North America, so that the teachings of Jesus continue to be read and interpreted in a wide variety of cultural contexts. A complex history will take into account the situation of ancient pluralism in which ancient Christianity arose and, in so doing, may afford some insights into what it means to be a Christian in our own pluralistic world. My immediate point here, however, is a much smaller issue: that the prevailing orthodox view about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, which we blithely characterize as the Judaeo-Christian tradition, was far from obvious to those by and for whom the *Gospel of Mary* was written. Because Christian identity had not yet been fixed in an orthodox form, alternative interpretations of Jesus' teachings were simply a part of the dynamic processes by which Christianity was being shaped. It is one of these alternatives that we will be exploring here.

One way to imagine the *Gospel of Mary* is to ask how someone with little or no real knowledge of Judaism, but steeped in the world view of ancient philosophical piety, would hear the teaching of Jesus. So powerful and pervasive is the prevailing perspective of orthodoxy that modern readers may well agree with Andrew that "indeed these teachings are strange ideas."[6] Strange to us perhaps, but not to the early Christians. They drew heavily upon popular Greek and Roman philosophy and piety, a fact obvious even in the canonical literature of the New Testament. Although written in the second century, the *Gospel of Mary* reflects a stream of interpretation reaching far back into the early decades of first century Christianity.

In order to imagine how the teachings of Jesus were heard among those for whom Platonism and Stoicism were common ways of thinking, it is important to give a brief overview of some of the ideas from those traditions that most strongly intersected with the *Gospel of Mary*'s teaching. Centuries before the *Gospel of Mary* was written, Plato had argued that a true lover of wisdom cultivates the soul and is not concerned with the pleasures of the body.[7] Since death is nothing more than the release of the soul from the prison[8] of the body,[9] he argued, the wise take care for the eternal well-being of the soul, not the crude and immediate demands of the body. Only through disciplining the body and avoiding as much as possible physical contacts and associations could the soul come to understand the truth of its own nature and the truth of Reality.[10]

Plato based these views on a distinction between what is eternal, immutable, uncreated, and known only through the mind (the Ideas or Images) and what is finite, mutable, created, and subject to sense-perception (the material world). The first is the Divine Realm of Reality, the latter the mortal realm.[11] The Divine Realm is completely free from evil of any kind, but evil cannot be done away with in the material world because evils are a part of mortal nature.[12] The created world was formed by imposing the pattern of the Divine Realm upon the material universe. Everything that is good and beautiful in the material world was made in the Image of the truly Good and Beautiful. That which is mortal and evil, however, has no Image in the Divine Realm because mortality and evil have no place in it.

There are, Plato says, "two patterns in the unchangeable nature of things, one of divine happiness, the other of godless misery." The character of each human soul is shaped by the pattern it follows. Fools led by their own ignorance and self-deception are, he says, unaware

that "in doing injustice they are growing less like one of these patterns and more like the other."[13] The wise, on the other hand, seek to conform as much as possible to the Image of the Divine. The goal of life, then, is to flee the mortal world with all its evils by becoming as much like the Divine as possible. Plato's character Socrates advises: "we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the Divine so far as we can, and that again is to become righteous with the help of wisdom. . . . In the Divine there is no shadow of unrighteousness, only the perfection of righteousness, and nothing is more like the Divine than any one of us who becomes as righteous as possible."[14]

"Fleeing the mortal world" could be accomplished both in this life through the cultivation of the soul by living a wise, free, and just life in this world, and in the next through the ascent of the soul to the Divine Realm at death. In this system, justice is meted out not by judges and courts of law, but by the workings of the universe. In this life, Plato wrote, the penalty of people's conduct "is the life they lead answering to the pattern they resemble."[15] The good life is its own reward in this world. But the life one leads also determines one's fate at death. Unless fools change their unjust and immoral behavior, at death the Divine Realm will refuse to accept them and they will be forced to dwell on earth "for all time in some form of life resembling their own and in the society of things as evil as themselves."[16] The wicked, Plato said, will be reincarnated into a form appropriate to their character: cowardly and unrighteous men become women; light-minded men become birds; and so on down to the most senseless and ignorant of all who become sea slugs.[17] But those who attain a likeness to God through righteousness and wisdom are able to ascend forever out of the mortal sphere.[18] Thus the only real punishment for wickedness is, so to speak, self-inflicted. Justice is built into the order of Reality itself.

For many people, however, the cosmos assumed a very different aspect. The early Stoic philosophers, for example, were largely materialists who rejected the existence of an immortal, immaterial soul. They argued that the universe and everything that exists is material by nature; even the soul is material, although it is made of particularly fine "stuff." The ethical teaching of the Stoics was very influential in antiquity, largely because much of it was very practical and focused on concerns of daily life. They taught that most external conditions are beyond a person's control, and that people achieve peace of mind only by focusing moral development on the interior attitudes that are under

one's control. You can't help being short or having a beautiful nose, being born into poverty or slavery, but shaping an appropriate attitude toward those conditions is within your power. The Stoics argued that virtue is achieved not by fighting against the way things are, but by living one's life in accord with nature and reason.

For Stoics, the ideal state of the wise and virtuous person was *apatheia*. *Apatheia* literally means "without passion"; our word "apathy" derives from it. But while "apathy" in English implies passivity and disinterest, the Stoic teaching is much more active, insisting that the passions should be rooted out and destroyed, since evil is caused by the four cardinal passions: pleasure, desire, distress, and fear. There is a tendency in modern thinking to regard feelings as irrational or at least as non-rational. But the Stoics treated the emotions primarily in terms of their cognitive character.[19] They thought that the passions arise not out of feeling, but through ignorance and false belief. The four primary passions derive from the cognitive capacity to distinguish between good and bad, between present and future. In this scheme, pleasure is defined as "judgment that what is presently at hand is good"; desire as "judgment that something still in the future is good or valuable"; distress as "judgment that what is presently at hand is bad"; and fear as "judgment that what is still in the future is bad."[20] The diseases of the soul are caused by accepting value judgments that are *false*. Only sound teaching and accurate knowledge of the truth about Reality can heal people of the diseases that wrack the whole self, body and soul. Hence the cardinal virtues of the wise person are moral insight, courage, self-control, and justice, all of which help a person make correct judgments and instill the character necessary to render those judgments into right behavior and attitudes. Moreover, many Stoics held that because the passions arise out of *false* ideas that have hardened into fixed dispositions of the soul, they need to be completely wiped out rather than merely moderated. Only complete extirpation of the passions could lead the soul to internal stability and tranquility.

By the time the *Gospel of Mary* was written, ideas from Platonists and Stoics had permeated popular culture in the eastern Mediterranean in much the same way that we modern Americans are all armchair psychologists, talking about childhood traumas, neuroses, and complexes whether or not we've ever actually read Freud. To greater or lesser degrees the ideas of these thinkers had become removed from their earlier literary and intellectual contexts. They had poured out of the relatively close parameters of the Greek city-state

and spilled over the broad geographical area and the diverse cultures encompassed by the Roman empire. Shifts in time and place meant that the social, political, and intellectual contexts within which people reflected upon such topics as human nature, justice, and ethics had shifted as well. The variety of the languages and cultures encompassed by the Roman empire ensured that Greek ideas were woven into new fabrics and turned to new constructions. In the pluralistic mix of ancient urban life, ideas that had been separate and indeed logically incompatible began to cohabit. The Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, for example, could be neatly grafted onto a Platonizing, dualistic conception of ethics as conflict between the body and the immaterial soul.

Historians have some idea of how the elite philosophers of the early Roman empire developed Platonic and Stoic ideas. But we know less about the form in which such ideas reached the general population, and how they were actually interpreted and employed by the vast semi-literate or illiterate majority of the population.[21] If the *Gospel of Mary* is any indication of popular thinking,[22] then it is clear that Plato's teaching had moved in directions that would no doubt have astonished him. A resurrected Jesus instructing his followers to tend their immortal souls and extirpate their passions in good Stoic fashion, so that at death they could outwit and defeat the wicked Powers who would try to stop them on their heavenly journey—such a portrait tells us that we have come a long way from the dinner party conversations of Athens' elite male citizens. Comparisons of the *Gospel of Mary*'s thinking with the ideas of Plato and the Stoics will allow us in some measure to chart the distance. There are four points of significant confluence: the association of evil with material nature, the need for correct knowledge of Reality to free the soul from the influence of the passions, an ethical orientation toward conformity with the pattern of the Good, and the ascent of the soul to the Divine Realm at death. But in each of these areas, the *Gospel of Mary* develops its thinking out of the Jesus tradition, and that made an enormous difference in both its theological content and social dynamics. In order to grasp further the significance of these ideas, they will be discussed below in greater detail under four rubrics: 1) the body and the world, 2) sin, judgment and law, 3) the Son of Man, and 4) the rise of the soul.

The Body and the World

The extant portion of the *Gospel of Mary* opens in the middle of a dialogue between the Savior and his disciples constructed in a ques-

tion-and-answer format. The topics are framed around questions from the disciples, followed by extended answers from the Savior. Each answer concludes with the formula, "Whoever has two ears to hear should listen," a saying well-attested in the Jesus tradition.[23]

The first topic of the existing dialogue concerns the nature of the material universe. One of the disciples asks: "Will matter then be utterly destroyed or not?" The Savior responds that although all material things form an interconnected unity,[24] they have no ultimate spiritual value and in the end will dissolve back into their original condition, which he calls their "root."[25]

The language in which the question and its answer are framed shows the influence of contemporary philosophical debates over whether matter is preexistent or created. If matter is preexistent, then it is eternal; if it is created, then it is subject to destruction. Only a few early philosophers, such as Eudorus of Alexandria (first century BCE),[26] held that matter was created out of nothing, although this position later became widely accepted. A more common position for the early period is reported by Cicero when he discusses the Platonists:

> But they hold that underlying all things is a substance called 'matter,' entirely formless and devoid of all 'quality,'. . . and that out of it all things have been formed and produced, so that this matter can in its totality receive all things and undergo every sort of transformation throughout every part of it, and in fact even suffers dissolution, not into nothingness but into its own parts.[27]

This concept presumes that matter has no form or qualities of its own; it is simply the substratum that is subject to being formed or produced.

The Savior agrees: everything will dissolve back into its own proper root. It does not matter whether things occur by nature, whether they have been molded out of formlessness, or whether they have been created from nothing, all will return to their original condition. He doesn't take a clear position on whether that natural state is formlessness or nothingness, but either way his point is clear: "anyone with two ears" should realize that because the material realm is entirely destined for dissolution, it is temporary, and therefore the world and the body have no ultimate spiritual value.

For both Plato and the *Gospel of Mary*, there are two natures, one

belonging to the material world and one to the Divine Realm. Evil belongs only in the material world and is associated with the finite and changing character of material reality. The nature of the Divine Realm is perfect Goodness, unchanging and eternal. The material world is the place of suffering and death; the Divine Realm offers immortality in peace. The dualism between the material and the Divine is definitely sharper in the *Gospel of Mary* than in Plato, but we would do well not to exaggerate it. The Savior argues that the material world is destined to dissolve back into its original root-nature; he does not say that it is evil and will be destroyed.

The position that the world is fleeting is hardly new to Christian thought. Paul had written that "the form of this world is passing away,"[28] and the *Gospel of Mark* says that "heaven and earth will pass away."[29] The difference is that they expected this dissolution to be the prelude to a new creation. For the *Gospel of Mary*, there will be no new creation. Dissolution is the final state, when everything that is now mixed up together will be separated and return to its proper "root"—the material to its formless nature or nothingness, and the spiritual to its root in the Good.

What difference does it make, we might wonder, whether one conceives of final salvation to be a future life with God in a new and righteous world, or spiritual life with God beyond time and matter? Clearly for all parties concerned, the question about the ultimate fate of the world was bound up with ethics. This linkage can be seen explicitly in *2 Peter*:

> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of person ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 *Pet* 3:10–13).

Knowing that this world will end calls people to give priority to what will not end. The author of *2 Peter* claims that the divine power of "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" has granted "great promises"

through which "you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature" (*2 Pet* 1:1, 4). Believers are admonished to supplement their faith with virtue, their virtue with knowledge, their knowledge with self-control, and their self-control with steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love.[30] They can do this because they have been cleansed from their old sins.[31] But if they turn away from this path, they will be subject to God's judgment, condemnation, and punishment.[32] The *Gospel of Mary* agrees with the teachings of *2 Peter* on many issues: that the ultimate dissolution of this world should call people to turn to God; that passion is at the root of the world's corruption; that believers are called to the divine nature, to faith, virtue, and knowledge. Where they part company concerns how they understand sin and judgment.

Chapter 5

Sin, Judgment, & Law

After hearing that matter will be dissolved, Peter asks, "What is the sin of the world?" The Savior responds, "There is no such thing as sin." For modern readers who perhaps too narrowly associate Christianity with the doctrine of the fundamental sinfulness of humanity, this statement could be shocking. But the Savior's surprising response needs to be read in the context of the discussions about matter which both precede and follow it. While the *Gospel of Mary* clearly defines sin differently from its common interpretation as wrong action or as the transgression of moral or religious laws, Christian theology generally understands sin as the condition of human estrangement from God. And this meaning is closer to the sense of the *Gospel of Mary*, in which the Savior is primarily concerned to orient the soul toward God.

The substantive difference is not the nature of sin, but the nature of the human body. Contrary to the view that later became basic to Christian orthodoxy, the *Gospel of Mary* does not regard the body as one's self. Only the soul infused with the spirit carries the truth of what it really means to be a human being. Since matter will eventually dissolve back into its constituent nature, the material world cannot be the basis for determining good and evil, right and wrong. Compare the *Gospel of Philip*:

> ... neither are the good good, nor the evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death. This is why each one will dissolve into its original source. But those who are exalted above the world will not be dissolved, for they are eternal (*GPhil* 53:17–23).

From this perspective, sin does not really exist insofar as it is conceived as action in the material world, which will be dissolved. At death the soul is released from the body and ascends to rest with God beyond time and eternity. The corpse returns to the inanimate material substance or nothingness out of which it arose. As a result, ethical concern is focused upon strengthening the spiritual self since it is the true, immortal, real self.

For the *Gospel of Mary*, the sinfulness of the human condition, the estrangement from God, is caused by mixing together the spiritual and material natures. While insisting that no sin exists *as such,* the Savior goes on to clarify that people do produce sin when they wrongly follow the desires of their material nature instead of nurturing their spiritual selves. He describes this sin as "adultery," an illegitimate mixing of one's true spiritual nature with the lower passions of the material body.[1] To sin means that people turn away from God toward concern for the material world and the body because they have been led astray by the passions. The disciples themselves produce sin by acting "according to the nature of adultery" (3:4). The metaphor fits the Savior's point quite well. Like adultery, sin joins together what should not be mixed: in this case, material and spiritual natures. Attachment to the material world constitutes adulterous consorting against one's own spiritual nature.

This attachment, the Savior says, is what leads people to sicken and die: "for you love what deceives you" (3:8). People's own material bodies deceive them and lead them to a fatal love of perishable material nature, which is the source of the disturbing passions, as well as physical suffering and death. This suffering, however, is deceptive because true knowledge can never be based upon unreliable bodily senses. When the soul "tries to investigate anything with the help of the body," Plato writes, "it is obviously led astray."[2] True Reality can be apprehended only when thought is free of all physical contact and associations.[3] This is basically what the Savior means when he tells Mary of Magdala: "Where the mind is, there is the treasure" (*GMary* 7:4). Turning the soul toward God would therefore not only lead people away from sin, it would overcome suffering and death. But people

cannot accomplish this without true knowledge, since they are driven by the passions.

Yet there is hope: "For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature. It will set it within its root" (*GMary* 3:5–6). God came to humanity in order to establish people in their true nature and set them up firmly within their proper "root," the natural good within themselves. The word "root" is used twice in the text (*GMary* 2:3; 3:6). Like English, the Coptic and Greek terms have a wide range of metaphorical implications: cause, origin, source, foundation, proper place, and so on. Here the "root" of perishable matter is contrasted with the proper "root" of a person's true spiritual nature which the Good will establish.

In 3:10-14, the Savior goes on to develop this distinction between matter and true nature, relying again upon the Platonic distinction between the changeable material world and the immutable world of Ideas (or Forms).[4] He says that "matter gave birth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature" (*GMary* 3:10). To say that passion "has no Image" means that it is not a true reflection of anything in the immutable Divine Realm. Because the passions are tied to suffering and deception and because no evil or falsehood belong to the Good, no divine Image of passion can really exist because true Reality belongs only to the Divine Realm. One might even say that "matter has no Image" because it lacks a heavenly origin and is contrary to the true nature of spiritual Reality; everything which is true and good is an Image of the divine Reality above.[5]

But that does not mean that the suffering caused by the passions is not real; passions lead to a disturbing confusion that wracks the entire body. The *Gospel of Mary* says that people suffer because they are led by the unnatural and deceptive passions of the body. The material nature of the body is the source of the disturbing passions, as well as of suffering and death. Peace of heart can be found only by turning away from conformity to this false nature, and forming one's true self to "that other Image of nature"[6] which the Good came to "set within its root." The teaching of the *Gospel of Mary* agrees very strongly with the Stoics that proper judgment based on a sure knowledge of Reality is necessary to overcome the devastating influence of the passions. It turns in a more Platonizing direction, however, in thinking that the diseases of the soul are caused in large part by people's failure to understand that their true nature is not material, but spiritual. It also

agrees with Plato's basic principle that although the immutable, spiritual Realm does not appear in this material world as it is in and of itself, it can be known through Images. The *Gospel of Philip* puts it this way:

> Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way (*GPhil* 69:7–11).[7]

When the Savior admonishes his disciples to "become contented and agreeable in the presence of that other Image of nature" (*GMary* 3:13), he is admonishing them to conform to the pattern of the Divine Realm. "That other Image of nature" is the reflection of the heavenly Realm that allows Divine Reality to be comprehended in the material world. It is this Image which the Savior will later admonish his disciples to seek within themselves. By turning toward the Good, the soul comes to follow its true spiritual nature and is no longer disturbed by the confusion of the body. The implication may be that if people were to conform to the spiritual nature of the Good, as the Savior teaches them, all the troubling confusion of the body would cease, and they would find both physical health and inner peace in this life, as well as attain salvation at death.

As was discussed above, the distinction between "the nature of matter which has no Image" and "that other Image of nature" is based on a philosophical distinction between the material world of sense perception and the Divine Realm. Although Plato considered the lower material world to be only an inferior copy of the higher Divine Realm of true Being, he still thought it was as good as it could possibly be, and beliefs about it were still useful, if not absolutely reliable. But in the *Gospel of Mary*, these views take on a more strictly dualistic cast in the light of human suffering. Confidence in material things is now equated with the deception that leads to death. "Anyone with two ears should listen," the Savior concludes (3:14).

Where the *Gospel of Mary* departs radically from the elite teachings of Plato and the Stoics is its insistence that sure knowledge comes only through the revelation of the Savior. Through Jesus' teachings, believers have access to a true understanding of the spiritual realities and therefore the possibility of salvation. The *Gospel of Mary* is less confident than the ancient Greeks that humans can discern the truth of things through the exercise of reason. Yet while less optimistic

about the condition of life in the material world than is Plato, it is also more utopian in regarding the soul's spiritual orientation to God as the source of healing and salvation. In taking this position, the *Gospel of Mary* marks out one of its decidedly Christian features.

Intimately tied to these ideas about the nature of the world and sin are the Savior's teachings about law and judgment. When he commissions the disciples to go out to preach the gospel, he charges them: "Do not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it" (*GMary* 4:9–10). Levi repeats this injunction at the end of the work before going forth to preach (10:13). How are we to understand this command? The "lawgiver" is surely a reference to Moses and hence to Jewish law. We know from other early Christian literature that in the first century considerable controversy among both Jews and Christians arose over how to interpret Jewish law. The *Gospel of Matthew*, for example portrays Jesus in conflict with other Jews over whether it is lawful to heal or to pluck grain on the Sabbath. When Jesus is charged with lawlessness, he responds that "The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath" (*Mark* 2:27) and again "It is not what goes into a person, but what comes out that determines whether a person is clean or not"(*Matt* 15:11).[8] Yet he also says:

> Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches people to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (*Matt* 5:17–19).

For the *Gospel of Matthew*, the issue is not whether to obey the law or not, but how to understand properly what the law demands. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul strongly opposed other apostles by insisting that Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ need not be circumcised or follow the purity laws regulating food preparation and consumption. He concludes, "We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a person is not justified by works

of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified" (*Gal* 2:15–16). For Paul, the law is from God, but it is not adequate to bring about salvation. "So the law is holy, the commandment is holy and just and good," Paul writes in *Rom* 7:12. And again, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law!" (*Rom* 3:31). In the end, however, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (*Rom* 8:1–2).

But these questions about the Jewish law, so crucial to early Christian self-definition, are not at issue in the *Gospel of Mary*. Rather the Savior is cautioning his disciples against *laws they themselves set*; it is these that will come to rule and restrict them. The Savior's command in the *Gospel of Mary* belongs to intra-Christian debate about the source of authority for Christian life and salvation, not the relationship to Jewish law. The reference to the "lawgiver" appears to be merely a remnant carried over from another setting where the relationship to Jewish law was an issue. But now in a Gentile context, the rejection of law has come to have a very different meaning. The Savior's point in the *Gospel of Mary* is that spiritual advancement cannot be achieved through external regulation; it has to be sought by transformation within a person. Not Mosaic law, but *Christian* regulations are seen to be the problem. This point is strengthened by noting that when Levi repeats the Savior's injunction, he leaves out any reference to "the lawgiver," saying only that they should "not lay down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said" (10:13).

Why emphasize this point by repeating it? Two scenes in the *Gospel of Mary* allow us to grasp more fully what was at stake. The first appears in the dialogue between the soul and the Powers who judge and condemn the soul, seeking to keep it bound under their domination. The second Power, Ignorance, in particular provides an explicit example of false judgment (9:8–15). It commands the soul "Do not judge!"—but it is the one who has judged and condemned the soul, declaring that it is bound by wickedness! The soul responds by declaring that it has not judged; it has not bound anything, even though it has been bound—not of course by wickedness, but by its attachment to the body and the world. Now that it has left these

behind, the soul is no longer subject to the condemnation of Ignorance nor of any other Power. Judgment and condemnation for sin belong to the lower world; once the soul has been set free, the Powers no longer have any power over it. This scene evinces a deep distrust of moral systems of law, styling them as a tool of illegitimate power based on the desire to dominate, ignorance of divine Reality, and vengeful wrath. The rules and laws set by the Savior are understood to lead one to spiritual freedom; they are free of the kind of ignorant and vicious judgments fed by the passions of the lower world. We can easily grasp the logic behind this stance by thinking about situations in our own world where legal systems and law enforcement are dominated by practices and policies that are fundamentally unjust or that serve only to bolster or ensure the status and safety of some groups, but not others. South Africa under apartheid is a notable example, but even in the United States unequal practices are all too often concomitant with differences in race or economic status.

Another scene exemplifying the text's attitude toward law and judgment appears in the dialogue between Mary and Peter. He does not understand the teachings of the Savior, and yet he judges Mary by calling her a liar. His words incite conflict among the disciples, leading Levi to point out that he is acting like a hot-head and treating Mary as though she were his adversary, not his sister. Levi recalls the words of the Savior in an attempt to dispel the conflict and bring the disciples back to their mission to preach the gospel. In this scene, Peter vociferously rejects Mary's words and denounces her because he is jealous that the Savior seemed to prefer her, a woman, to himself—and he tries to bring the other male disciples over to his point of view by including them in his charge. According to the Coptic version, he asks: "Did the Savior, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are *we* to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over *us*?" (BG 10:3b–4). The Greek version reads: "Surely he didn't want to show that she is more worthy than *we* are?" (PRyl 10.4). But that appears to be exactly the case. Levi rejoins: "If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her steadfastly" (PRyl 10:9–10). The Coptic pushes the point even more strongly: "Assuredly the Savior's knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us" (BG 10:10).

By supporting Mary, the *Gospel of Mary* makes it clear that leadership is to be based upon spiritual achievement rather than on having a

male body. Clearly Mary is spiritually more advanced than the male disciples; because she did not fear for her life at the departure of the Savior and did not waver at the sight of him in her vision, she is able to step into the Savior's role and teach the others. She thereby models true discipleship: the appropriation and preaching of the Savior's teaching.

Elaine Pagels has suggested that the Savior's injunction was written specifically against Paul's attempt to silence women by appeal to the law.[9] His first letter to the Corinthians says:

> As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church (*1 Cor* 14:33b–35).[10]

There is no such law in the Hebrew Scriptures, although *1 Timothy* appeals to *Genesis* to make a similar point:

> Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (*1 Tim* 2:11–14).

1 Timothy is attributed to Paul, although it is pseudonymous, having been written in the early second century, and merely asserts Paul's apostolic authority to authorize its message. Could the *Gospel of Mary* have known these passages? I find no obvious evidence that it knew them directly, but the issue of women's leadership roles in the churches was wide-spread and appeal was made to law, whether natural or written, to support various positions.[11] The portrayal of the conflict between Mary and Peter, followed as it is by a repetition of the Savior's injunction not to lay down any laws beyond what he commanded, clearly suggests that any regulation forbidding women's teaching was one of those laws set by the disciples which would have the effect of injecting illegitimate domination into the life of the Christian community. Any such regulation must necessarily be the product of jealousy and a deep misunderstanding of the Savior's teaching.

Because the *Gospel of Mary* was in circulation for over three hundred years, we have to assume that the Savior's command against oppressive laws was interpreted in a variety of contexts by various groups of readers. It could have been read as resistance to the establishment of various kinds of external restraints—not only certain aspects of Jewish law, but also the formation of an exclusive Christian canon,[12] restrictions on prophecy and visionary revelation, the exclusion of women from official positions of leadership, or even against colonial Roman law. If we are to imagine a second or third century setting in Egypt, for example, it is quite possible that many people would associate a "lawgiver" as readily with the Romans as with Moses. In the end, however, it is the law *that they themselves set* that would come to rule and restrict them. Spiritual advancement is to be sought within, not through external regulation. The context for this kind of command in the *Gospel of Mary* applies most clearly to intra-Christian controversies, not to relations with Jews or Romans.

Chapter 6

The Son of Man

The Coptic phrase ⲡϣⲏⲣⲉ ⲛ̄ⲣⲱⲙⲉ (Greek *υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*) is usually translated "Son of Man." In the *Gospel of Mary* the "Son of Man" is the child of true Humanity, the Image of the Divine Realm that exists within every person. It is identified as the true Image of nature to which the disciples are supposed to conform, the image of humanity's true spiritual nature.[1] In his farewell to the disciples, the Savior tells them: "The child of true Humanity exists within you" (4:5). The Savior commands them: "Follow it! Those who search for it will find it" (4:6). The verb "to follow," says Pasquier, "in the *Gospel of Mary*, as with certain Stoics and Pythagoreans, appears to have the meaning of 'grasping something as a model'. . . in order to become in turn a model oneself; in short, in this context, it requires the idea of an identification."[2] To find and follow the child of true Humanity within requires identifying with the archetypal Image of Humanity as one's most essential nature and conforming to it as a model. Those who search for it will find it, the Savior assures his disciples.

Note how one is *not* to find it: by looking outside of oneself. The *Gospel of Mark*, for example, understands the Son of Man to be a messianic figure who will come in clouds with power and glory in the end times (13:26). In contrast, the *Gospel of Mary* admonishes: "Be on

your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Look over here!' or 'Look over there!'" This warning shows a knowledge of apocalyptic eschatology, such as we see in the *Gospel of Mark* and many other sources, but it rejects it entirely. The *Gospel of Mary* does not understand "Son of Man" as a messianic title and never uses it to refer to Jesus. For the *Gospel of Mary*, the Son of Man is not the Savior Jesus, but the true self within. Nor does the phrase mean simply "human being," as it does for example in Jesus' saying that the son of man has nowhere to lay his head (*Matt* 8:20). For the *Gospel of Mary*, it refers to the ideal, the truly Human. Plato had posited the existence of a Form of Man (Greek *anthropos*)[3] existing in the Divine Realm apart from all the particular humans that share in that Form.[4] The *Gospel of Mary* has interpreted Jesus' traditional teaching about the child of true Humanity to refer to this archetypal Form of Man, possibly in conjunction with the statement in *Genesis* 1:26–27 that humanity was created in the image of God, male and female.

But there are significant differences. For Plato, the Form of Man was clearly imagined as a male image; indeed Plato had suggested in the *Timaeus* that women were deviations from the ideal male norm, divergences which had resulted from cowardice. That cannot be the case in the *Gospel of Mary*, for when Mary comforts the disciples, she admonishes them: "We should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made *us* true Human Beings" (5:7–8). The Coptic term underlying the translation "true Human Beings" is ⲛⲣⲱⲙⲉ; Greek ἀνθρώπους. Both terms can refer either to humanity in general or to male persons, much as the English word "man." The use of the plural here, however, includes both Mary and the male disciples, so the meaning must be generic. Furthermore, they were already human beings in the strict sense; the Savior after all did not turn them from asses into humans, as happened to an unfortunate character in Apuleius' story, *The Golden Ass*; there a man had unwittingly been magically transformed into an ass and was made human again only by the intervention of the Goddess Isis. In the *Gospel of Mary*, being made human means that the Savior's teaching has led the disciples to find the Image of the child of true Humanity within. They have grasped the archetypal Image and become truly Human.

Levi's reiteration of the Savior's teaching at the end of the work reinforces this interpretation: "We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquiring it for ourselves as the Savior commanded us" (10:11). Here, too, the notion of the perfect Human (Coptic:

ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲛⲧⲉⲗⲓⲟⲥ; Greek: *τέλειον ἄνθρωπον*) refers to the Savior's earlier admonition to find the child of true Humanity within.[5] To find the child of true Humanity within or to put on the perfect Human means to come to know that one's true self is a spiritual being whose roots are nourished by the transcendent Good. Salvation means appropriating this spiritual Image as one's truest identity.[6]

Scholars have sometimes inaccurately equated Mary's statement that the Savior made the disciples truly Human with Jesus' statement in the *Gospel of Thomas* that he will make Mary male. The passage in the *Gospel of Thomas* reads,

> Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life."
> Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven" (*GThom* 114).

Much as the scene later in the *Gospel of Mary*, this passage also pits Peter against Mary but the import of the Savior's teaching is quite different. In the *Gospel of Mary*, the Savior uses the generic term, "human being" (Coptic: ⲣⲱⲙⲉ), and he makes both Mary and the male disciples into Human Beings. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus uses the non-generic term "male" (Coptic: ϩⲟⲟⲩⲧ) and he specifically says that he will make Mary male, and other women "will make themselves male resembling you males." The difference in gender imagery is striking. However we interpret Jesus' saying in the *Gospel of Thomas*—and numerous suggestions have been made such as conforming to the male ideal or taking up asceticism—it clearly understands the male condition to be superior to that of women. Not so for the *Gospel of Mary*. It is straining to articulate a vision that the natural state of humanity is ungendered, while constrained by language that was suffused with the androcentric values of its day.[7] But the vision is clear: for the *Gospel of Mary*, the divine, transcendent Image to which the soul is to conform is non-gendered; sex and gender belong only to the lower sphere of temporary bodily existence. The theological basis for this position lies in the understanding that the body is not the true self; the true self is spiritual and nongendered, even as the divine is nonmaterial and nongendered. Remember that God is not called Father in this work, but only the Good, a term that in Greek can

easily be grammatically neuter. In order to conform as far as possible to the divine Image, one must abandon the distinctions of the flesh, including sex and gender.

Chapter 7

Vision & Mind

After the Savior departs, Peter asks Mary to disclose any words of the Savior which she knew, but which were unknown to the other disciples (6:1–2). Mary reports a dialogue she had with the Savior. It began with her telling the Savior that she had seen a vision of him.[1] She did not waver at the sight, but immediately acknowledged the Lord's presence. He, in turn, praised her for her steadfastness, saying: "Blessed are you for not wavering at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure" (7:3–4). The term "wavering" carries important connotations in ancient thought, where it implies instability of character.[2] Mary's stability illustrates her conformity to the unchanging and eternal spiritual Realm, and provides one more indication of her advanced spiritual status. The saying about treasure reinforces the Savior's praise. The term "mind" points the reader back to Mary's earlier ministry to the other disciples in which "she turned their mind toward the Good" (POxy 5:9). It is because Mary has placed her mind with God that she can direct others to the spiritual treasure of the Good.

The saying about treasure is often quoted in early Christian literature.[3] For example in *Q*, an early collection of Jesus' words used by the writers of *Matthew* and *Luke*, the saying is used to warn people against

greed and attachment to ephemeral wealth.[4] In the *Gospel of Mary*, however, the saying introduces Mary's next question and points ahead to the Savior's response. She asks whether one receives a vision by the soul or the spirit. The Savior responds that "a person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. Rather the mind, which exists between these two, sees the vision and that is what . . ." Unfortunately, the text breaks off here and we are left without the rest of the Savior's answer, but it is clear that he is describing the tripartite composition of the true inner self: it is made up of soul, mind, and spirit. Enough remains of the Savior's response to glimpse an intriguing answer into a very difficult issue: how does a prophet see a vision?[5] The mind conveys the vision, functioning as a mediator between the spirit and the soul.

Early Christians were fully part of ancient Mediterranean society and shared the concepts common to that culture. It was widely believed that gods and spirits communicated with people through trances, possessions, and dreams. Opinions differed about how that occurred, and the issue was widely discussed among ancient scientists, philosophers, and physicians. Christians also had differing opinions on the matter, depending upon which intellectual tradition they drew upon. In the *Gospel of Mary*, the Savior is taking a very specific position on the issue. The significance of his answer to Mary can be better appreciated by comparing it with the views of the church father Tertullian, who wrote *A Treatise on the Soul* (*De anima*) at the turn of the third century. He discussed this same issue, but took a different position than the *Gospel of Mary*.

Both Tertullian and the *Gospel of Mary* valued prophetic experiences highly and considered them to be authoritative for Christian teaching and practice. They believed that only the pure could see God in visions, because sin and attachment to the things of the flesh dim the spiritual comprehension of the soul. There the similarity ends. They disagreed on almost every other important issue.

The most fundamental basis of their disagreement rests on conflicting views about what it is to be a human being. Tertullian understood a person to be made up of a body and soul, joined in a completely unified relationship.[6] The mind is the ruling function of the soul, not something separate from it. He maintained that the soul, as well as the body, is material. It is shaped in the form of the human body and even "has its own eyes and ears owing to which people[7] see and hear the Lord; it also has other limbs through which it experi-

ences thoughts and engages in dreams" (*De anima* 9:8). Souls are even sexed: "The soul, being sown in the womb simultaneously with the flesh, is allotted its sex simultaneously with the flesh such that neither substance controls the cause of sex" (*De anima* 36:2). He regarded male souls to be superior to female souls by nature.[8] Thus sexual differentiation and gender hierarchy are natural to the soul's very existence.

For the *Gospel of Mary*, a human being is composed of body, soul, and mind.[9] The mind is the most divine part of the self, that which links it with God. The mind rules and leads the soul, so that when the mind is directed toward God, it purifies and directs the soul toward spiritual attainment. As the Savior said, "Where the mind is, there is the treasure" *(GMary* 7:4). In contrast to Tertullian's view, the body is seen as merely a temporary shell to which the soul has become attached. It is this attachment of the soul to the body that causes sickness and death. At death the soul leaves the body and ascends to its immortal rest, while the material body returns to its originally inanimate, soulless nature. The *Gospel of Mary* also denies that souls are sexed; sexuality and the gender differences inscribed on the body belong to the material nature that the soul must transcend. Differences between men and women are therefore ultimately illusory since they don't belong to the true self, but only to bodies that will cease to exist at death. They belong to the world of matter and the passions, not the spiritual Realm.

Because their views about human nature diverged, Tertullian and the author of the *Gospel of Mary* also disagreed about the nature of sin and salvation. Tertullian believed that the soul was polluted from the moment that pagan birth rituals were performed under the influence of the devil.[10] Because of the pollution of the soul, the body was actively sinful. Only the regeneration of the soul through faith in Christ, sealed in baptism and confirmed through proper instruction in the rule of faith, could purify the soul and lead a person out of sin. The final hope of the believer was for the physical resurrection of the body, including the material soul.[11]

As we have seen, the *Gospel of Mary* defines sin as the adulterous relationship of the soul to the body. When the soul becomes attached to the body, it is overcome by the frailties and passions of the material nature, leading to sickness and death. By turning away from the body and recognizing one's true self as a spiritual being, the self can find the child of true Humanity within and conform to that Image. This

knowledge will allow the soul to escape the illegitimate domination of the flesh and ascend to rest with God. The teaching of the Savior brings the salvation of the soul, not the resuscitation of a corpse.

Their views about how prophecy occurs are directly tied to these views. Tertullian held that all souls have some measure of original goodness on the basis of which they can prophesy.[12] Hence after a soul has been purified by embracing the Christian faith and accepting baptism, it is capable of prophesying.[13] Prophetic experience occurs when the soul steps from the body in ecstasy:

> Accordingly, when sleep comes upon bodies (for sleep is the comfort that is peculiar to it), the soul, being free, does not sleep (because sleep is alien to it), and since it lacks the assistance of the limbs of the physical body, it uses its own.... This power we call ecstasy, the departure of the senses and the appearance of madness (*De anima* 45:2, 3).[14]

Ecstasy ("the departure of the senses and the appearance of madness") is common in sleep, and Tertullian associates this state with dreaming. Not all dreams, however, are prophetic. Dreams can come from three sources: demons, God, or the soul itself.[15] In true prophecy, the soul is moved by the divine Spirit and experiences ecstasy.[16] Only this madness signals the divine presence:

> ... ecstasy, that is being out of one's senses, accompanies the divine gift. For since human beings have been formed in the Spirit, they must be deprived of sense perception particularly when they behold the glory of God, or when God speaks through them, since they have been manifestly overshadowed by the divine power (*Against Marcion* 4:22).[17]

According to the *Gospel of Mary*, however, it is not the soul that sees the vision, but the mind acting as a mediator between the sensory perceptions of the soul and the divine spirit. This view was widely held among Christian theologians.[18] For example, the second-century theologian and martyr, Justin,[19] argued that God is invisible, and thus "the vision of God does not occur with the eyes, as with other living beings, but He can be grasped only by the mind, as Plato says; and I believe him" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 3). The famous third-century Egyptian theologian, Origen agrees:

> God, moreover, is in our judgment invisible, because He is not a body, while He can be seen by those who see with the heart, that is the mind, not indeed with any kind of heart, but with one which is pure (*Against Celsus* 6:69).[20]

The *Gospel of Mary* clearly agrees that only spiritually advanced souls have visionary experiences. Mary, for example, is praised by the Savior because she has not wavered at the sight of him.[21] The Savior ascribes Mary's stability to the fact that her mind is concentrated on spiritual matters. Mary has clearly achieved the purity of mind necessary to see the Savior and converse with him. The vision is a mark of that purity and her closeness to God.[22] Note, too, that her stability is in marked contrast with the contentious fearfulness of the other disciples. Because the mind is not associated with the senses, it is not dimmed in the presence of the Spirit. Madness and ecstasy are not necessary characteristics of true prophecy from the *Gospel of Mary*'s point of view; rather the purified mind is clear and potent.

In short, Tertullian and the *Gospel of Mary* differ in their conceptions of the fundamental nature of the person (whether human nature is fundamentally material or spiritual), the character of sexual differentiation and gender roles (whether natural or illusory), and the role of the human mind in relationship to God (whether dimmed or potent). It is clear, even from this brief overview, that the discussion of how prophecy occurred was intertwined with such central issues of early Christian theology as attitudes toward the body, the understanding of human nature, sexuality and gender roles, and views about the nature of sin and salvation. All these issues are at stake in answering the question: "Lord, how does a person see a vision?"

Chapter 8

The Rise of the Soul

When the story resumes after the four-page hiatus, we are in the middle of an account of the rise of the soul to God. Mary is recounting the Savior's revelation about the soul's encounters with four Powers who seek to keep it bound to the world below. The missing beginning of the account must have included the soul's encounter with the first of the four Powers, probably named Darkness.[1] When the extant portion of the text resumes, the second Power, Desire, is addressing the soul, which replies and then ascends to the next level:

> And Desire said, "I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?" The soul answered, "I saw you. You did not see me nor did you know me. You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. And you did not recognize me." After it had said these things it left rejoicing greatly (*GMary* 9:2–7).

Desire here attempts to keep the soul from ascending by claiming that it belongs to the world below and the Powers that rule it. The Power assumes that by attempting to escape, the soul is claiming that it does not belong to the material world. From Desire's point of view

that is a lie; since it did not see the soul come down from the world above, it thinks the soul must indeed belong to the material world. But the soul knows better and exposes the Power's ignorance. It is true, the wise soul responds, you did not recognize me when I descended because you mistook the bodily garment of flesh for my true spiritual self. Now the soul has left the body behind along with the material world to which it belongs. The Power never knew the soul's true self—as the Power has itself unwittingly admitted by saying it didn't see the soul descend. The response of the soul has unmasked the blindness of Desire: the Power had not been able to see past the soul's material husk to its true spiritual nature. But the soul did see the Power, thereby proving that its capacity to discern the true nature of things is superior to Desire's clouded vision. Having thus exposed Desire's impotence and lack of spiritual insight, the soul gleefully ascends to the third Power.

> Again, it came to the third Power, which is called Ignorance. [It] examined the soul closely, saying, "Where are you going? You are bound by wickedness. Indeed you are bound! Do not judge!" And the soul said, "Why do you judge me, since I have not passed judgment? I have been bound, but I have not bound (anything). They did not recognize me, but I have recognized that the universe is to be dissolved, both the things of earth and those of heaven" (*GMary* 9:8–15).

Again the Power attempts to stop the soul's ascent by challenging its nature. Ignorance judges the soul to be material, and therefore bound by the wickedness of the passions and lacking in discernment: "Do not judge!" it commands. But the soul turns the tables: it is the Power of Ignorance who is judging; a soul is bound to the lower world, not by its material nature but by the wicked domination of the Powers. This soul is innocent precisely because it acts according to the nature of the spirit: it does not judge others nor does it attempt to dominate anything or anyone. It has knowledge of which Ignorance is ignorant; it knows that because everything in the lower world is passing away, the Powers of that transitory world have no real power over the eternal soul.[2] The soul's rejoinder to the Power here is a kind of applied restatement of the Savior's teaching about sin and nature given earlier in the text: "There is no such thing as sin" (*GMary* 3:3). Only because of the domination of the flesh does sin even appear to exist.

Without the flesh—which is to be dissolved—there is no sin, judgment, or condemnation.[3] The soul for its part rejects any kind of judgment and domination, associating them with the Power of Ignorance. The soul's insight into its own true spiritual identity enables it to overcome the illegitimate domination of the Power. Again, the wit in the passage lies in the fact that it is the Power itself which has acknowledged that the soul's knowledge is true: wickedness is due only to the domination of the flesh. This insight frees the soul and it moves upward to the Fourth Power.

> When the soul had brought the third Power to naught, it went upward and saw the fourth Power which had seven forms. The first is darkness; the second is desire; the third is ignorance; the fourth is zeal for death; the fifth is the realm of the flesh; the sixth is the foolish wisdom of the flesh; the seventh is the wisdom of the wrathful person. These are the seven Powers of Wrath. They interrogated the soul, "Where are you coming from, human-killer, and where are you going, space-conqueror?" The soul replied, saying "What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been destroyed, and my desire has been brought to an end, and ignorance has died. In a [wor]ld, I was set loose from a world [an]d in a type, from a type which is above, and (from) the chain of forgetfulness which exists in time. From this hour on, for the time of the due season of the aeon, I will receive rest i[n] silence" (*GMary* 9:16–29).

The names of the seven Powers of Wrath may correspond to the astrological spheres that control fate,[4] but above all they show the character of the Powers that attempt to dominate the soul: desire, ignorance, death, flesh, foolishness, and wrath. Their collective character and name is Wrath.

Like the other Powers, Wrath seems disturbed at the soul's passage and questions both its origin and its right to pass by. But again the Power ignorantly plays into the hands of the wise and playful soul who knows that it derives from above and is returning to its true place of origin. Wrath charges the soul with violence, stating that it is a murderer (because it has cast off the material body) and a conqueror (because it has traversed the spheres of the Powers and overcome them). These terms of approbation are greeted happily by the soul

who reinterprets them, affirming that indeed the material elements and the body that bound it in lust and ignorance have been overcome and it is free from bondage. The soul dramatically contrasts the subjection to material bonds, desire, and ignorance it has escaped, with the freedom of the timeless realm of silence and rest to which it ascends; it distinguishes the deceitful image below from the true Image above, and mortality from immortality. Even as the soul finally finds perfect rest in silence,[5] so, too, does Mary become silent, modeling in her behavior the perfect rest of the soul set free.[6]

At the temple of Apollo in Claros, Greece, archaeologists found a stone bearing a late second-century CE inscription that reads:

> When someone asked Apollo whether the soul remained after death or was dissolved, he answered, "The soul, so long as it is subject to its bonds with the destructible body, while being immune to feelings, resembles the pains of that (body); but when it finds freedom after the mortal body dies, it is borne entire to the aether, being then forever ageless, and abides entirely untroubled; and this the First-born Divine Providence enjoined."[7]

The belief that the soul could leave the body at death and ascend to an eternal life of peace beyond the heavenly spheres, while not the only view of death or the afterlife in antiquity, was widely held in the late Roman period.[8] But the confidence of Apollo's oracle that the journey would be an easy one was not widely felt. A successful conclusion was far from assured. More often the soul's passage was thought to be fraught with numerous perils that few could overcome.

A glimpse into the soul's trials after death is given in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, one of the works discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. This work is an elaboration of the visionary journey that Paul described in *2 Corinthians*:

> I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter (*2 Cor* 12:1–4).

Of course, this unnamed man was most likely Paul himself. The author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* draws upon Paul's own account, but does not share his reticence about revealing what he saw and heard. This author is happy to imagine everything and tell all. In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the third heaven is only the beginning of Paul's journey. At the fourth heaven, he sees angels whipping a soul who had been brought out of the land of the dead. When the soul asks what sin it has committed to deserve such punishment, the toll-collector brings out three witnesses who accuse it of various misdeeds. Obliged to face the truth, the sorrowful soul is cast down again into a body that had been prepared for it. In the fifth heaven, Paul sees an angel with an iron rod and others with whips, all goading souls on to judgment. He manages to get past them and on to the sixth heaven only because his guide is the Holy Spirit. In the seventh heaven, an old man seated on a luminous throne and dressed in white interrupts Paul's ascent, demanding to know where he is going, where he has come from, and how Paul thinks he will be able to get away from him. Paul replies with the correct answers and, at a prompt from his guide, gives the old man a sign that allows him to proceed. He then joins the twelve apostles and ascends with them to the ninth heaven, and finally goes up to the tenth heaven where he greets his fellow spirits.

This account contains many of the elements common to ancient stories of the souls' rise. Antiquity was home to a wide variety of post-mortem scenarios that involved rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. Such views were sometimes elaborated with stories about the righteous ascending directly to God.[9] Views about the judgment of the dead could be combined with the idea that angelic (or demonic) gate-keepers or toll-collectors attempt to stop souls and send them back into bodies. These notions were based on current astrological beliefs that the planets were powers who governed the fate of all beings in the world. The soul's ascent was seen as an attempt to escape from their arbitrary and unforgiving rule by successfully passing through each of the planetary spheres. Sin was considered to be a determinative impediment to escape because sinful souls, unable to pay the price, were returned to the flesh—presumably to try to do better. Moral purity was absolutely essential since ultimately only the souls of the good would ascend.

Yet because of the journey's extreme dangers, it was sometimes held that moral purity and righteousness alone might not be enough. Preparation was necessary to ensure safe passage. Special guidance, revealed knowledge, and ritual signs contributed to the success of the

journey.[10] Instruction about the obstacles that would confront the soul and how to overcome them was required. This instruction often included learning the questions the gate-keepers would pose and the traps they would set. Having the right answers and the capacity to see through their devious machinations could protect the soul. Given that after-death experience undoubtedly presupposed esoteric knowledge, the necessary instruction obviously had to be based on revelation. This information could come through reports of a visionary journey through the heavens such as Paul took, or it could be given by a divine messenger-instructor such as the Savior in the *Gospel of Mary*. Additionally, ritual purification and empowerment were often considered essential to aid the soul in its journey. Such purification most often included baptism[11] and ritual enactment of the ascent itself,[12] but it could include other rites and magical practices as well, some of them quite elaborate.[13]

Popular views of this sort were often combined in various ways with philosophical speculations which envisioned the soul as an immortal being that would return to its divine origins when released from the bonds of the mortal body; it had come down from the stars or from some luminous realm beyond the material world and would return there at death. In the process of descent, the soul or its vehicle had acquired accretions that needed to be removed in order for the soul to ascend back to its divine sphere. As one account from the Hermetic corpus describes it,

> And then (the soul) rises upward through the structure of the heavens. And to the first zone of heaven he gives up the force which works increase and decrease; to the second zone, the machinations of evil cunning; to the third zone, the lust which deceives people; to the fourth zone, domineering arrogance; to the fifth zone, unholy daring and rash audacity; to the sixth zone, evil strivings after wealth; and to the seventh zone, the falsehood which lies in wait to work harm. And then, having been stripped of all that was worked upon him by the structure of the heavens, he ascends to the substance of the eighth sphere, being now possessed of his own proper power; and he sings, together with those who dwell there, hymning the Father; and they that are there rejoice with him at his coming. And being made like to those with whom he dwells, he hears the Powers, who are above the substance of

> the eighth sphere, singing praise to God with a voice that is theirs alone. And thereafter, each in his turn, they mount upward to the Father; they give themselves up to the Powers, and becoming Powers themselves, they enter into God. This is the Good; this is the consummation for those who have got knowledge (*Poimandres* 1:25–26a).[14]

Many accounts in late antique literature describe the soul's journey past the guardians.[15] Often angelic guards are represented as the instruments of justice. The gate-keeper in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, for example, rightly judged a soul's wickedness and sent it back into the body until like Paul it should be purified through faith. But in other accounts the gate-keepers are presented as wicked and ignorant beings who are wrongly trying to keep pure souls trapped below. In the *First Apocalypse of James*, for example, the Lord warns his brother James about the difficulties he will face:

> "A multitude will arm themselves against you in order to seize you. And in particular three of them will seize you—the ones who sit as toll collectors. Not only do they demand toll, but they also take away souls by theft. When you come into their power, one of them who is their guard will say to you, 'Who are you or where are you from?' You are to say to him, 'I am a son, and I am from the Father.' He will say to you, 'What sort of son are you, and to what father do you belong?' You are to say to him, 'I am from the Pre-existent Father, and a son in the Pre-existent One.'... When he also says to you, 'Where will you go?' you are to say to him, 'To the place from which I have come, there shall I return.' And if you say these things, you will escape their attacks" (*1ApocJas* 33:4–24; 34:15–30).

Here the toll-collectors are clearly malevolent thieves who steal souls. But the questions they ask only demand that James know his true identity and place of origin. Knowledge is sufficient to escape their attacks. His moral condition is not an issue, and there is no hint of judgment for sins.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, however, we find both themes: the malevolent character of the gate-keepers and the moral judgment of the soul. When combined they produce an astonishingly sharp image of the

gate-keepers as tools of false justice and offer a satirical critique of the unjust nature of power in the world below. The dialogues between the soul and the Powers show that their domination is based on lies, blind ignorance, and false justice; their condemnation of the enlightened soul for wickedness and violence is rooted in their own blindness, lust for power, and ignorance of the Good. The soul opposes their lies with truth, their adultery with purity, their ignorance with knowledge, their judgment with refusal to judge, their blindness with true vision, their domination with freedom, their desire with peace, and their mortal death with life eternal. The soul's entire battle with the Powers focuses on overcoming their illegitimate domination.

Although it is quite possible that this section on the rise of the soul was originally a separate literary source only later incorporated into the dialogue framework, it amplifies important themes in the Savior's teaching raised during the initial dialogue with his disciples. In the account of the soul's rise, salvation is conceived as overcoming the passions, suffering, and death that are associated with the physical body and the lower world. The Savior's admonition not to lay down any law is elaborated as we see the Powers, sitting like corrupt judges in a law court, working to condemn the soul in its struggle to escape their domination. Law, it would seem, is set up to work on the side of those who wish to enslave the soul. The soul's refusal to judge is also a refusal to be bound by their unjust and ignorant laws. Those who judge, the Savior teaches, are ruled by laws that can then be used to judge them. Such laws are really domination; such knowledge as the Powers offer is really ignorance.

The whole dialogue between the soul and the Powers is characterized by a sharp contrast between the world above and the world below. The Divine Realm above is light, peace, knowledge, love, and life; the lower world is darkness, desire, arrogance, ignorance, jealousy, and the zeal for death. More is going on in this contrast than merely a simple belief in the immortality of righteous souls, or even the struggle against the arbitrary powers of fate. The dialogues instruct the reader in the truth about the very nature of Reality by contrasting it with the deception that characterizes life in the world. The dialogue of the soul with the Powers stresses as does no other ancient ascent account the unjust nature of the Powers' illegitimate domination. In so doing the *Gospel of Mary* presents a biting critique of how power is exercised in the lower world under the guise of law and judgment.

How are we to understand this critique? The *Gospel of Mary* is

clearly a religious work aimed at freeing the soul from the bonds of suffering and death; there is no outright call for political rebellion or explicit criticism of either local or imperial Roman domination. But cannot a religious work incorporate a political message? Indeed if we overlook the subversive implications of the *Gospel of Mary*, I think we miss one of its most important elements.

It has been a commonplace to exclude covert forms of resistance from consideration as real political activity. In fact, religious teaching like that of the *Gospel of Mary*, which points the soul toward peace in the afterlife, is often seen not only as apolitical, but as anti-political—an escapist ideology that serves only to distract people from effective political engagement by focusing on interior spiritual development and flight from the material world with all its troubles and demands. Research among social scientists has changed this view dramatically. Let me cite at length the conclusion of the most influential researcher in this area, James Scott. He writes:

> Until quite recently, much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political. To emphasize the enormity of what has been, by and large, disregarded, I want to distinguish between the open, declared forms of resistance, which attract most attention, and the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance that constitutes the domain in infrapolitics. ... For contemporary liberal democracies in the West, an exclusive concern for open political action will capture much that is significant in political life. The historic achievement of political liberties of speech and association has appreciably lowered the risks and difficulty of open political expression. Not so long ago in the West, however, and, even today, for many of the least privileged minorities and marginalized poor, open political action will hardly capture the bulk of political action. Nor will an exclusive attention to declared resistance help us understand the process by which new political forces and demands germinate before they burst on the scene. How, for example, could we understand the open break represented by the civil rights movement or the black power movement in the 1960s without understanding the offstage discourse among black students, clergy, and their parishioners?
>
> Taking a long historical view, one sees that the luxury of

> relatively safe, open political opposition is both rare and recent. The vast majority of people have been and continue to be not citizens, but subjects. So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared, we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt, and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond.
>
> . . . Finally, millennial imagery and the symbolic reversals of folk religion are the infrapolitical equivalents of public, radical, counterideologies: both are aimed at negating the public symbolism of ideological domination.[16]

It is just such opposition and reversal that characterizes the soul's dialogues with the Powers.

As Scott points out, groups labeled heterodox or heretical have always been significant sites for ideological resistance. We might do well to remember here that the Romans persecuted Christians under the charge of atheism and undermining the public good. Such groups stand at a critical distance from the dominant society, a distance that enables them to articulate "an original attitude toward the meaning of the cosmos."[17] Their politics are often cultivated among what the famous sociologist Max Weber marvelously called "pariah-intelligentsia."[18] His point is that this kind of resistance does not necessarily arise among those who *reject* the values of the dominant society, so much as among those who were very deeply committed to them and feel *betrayed* by the failures of leaders to live up to the values they espouse.[19] The fact that the *Gospel of Mary*'s critique is couched in the fantastic terms of the religious imagination should not lead us to ignore its political import. Its critique of the body and the world with its suffering and its wrathful rulers draws its power precisely from an uncompromising commitment to the values of justice, peace, and stability pervasive throughout the Roman world. It is these elements of Roman ideology that provoke the feeling of betrayal. From this perspective, the *Gospel of Mary* is not aimed at nihilism, but at cultivating an uncompromising, utopian vision of spiritual perfec-

tion and peace rooted in the divine Good, beyond the constraints of time and matter and false morality. Social criticism and spiritual development were irrevocably linked together in this vision.

The criticism offered by the *Gospel of Mary* is very general; it does not seem aimed at anything or anyone in particular. Such generality is part of the strategic method of covert resistance, for it affords both discretion (one can easily deny that any criticism was intended) and potential long-term effectiveness (since it allows for adaptation to diverse and changing circumstances). Like other Christian works such as the New Testament *Book of Revelation*, the *Gospel of Mary* holds that the world is under the control of malevolent beings. This doctrine not only explains the existence of evil and injustice, but also locates an object at which resistance can be aimed. The *Gospel of Mary* makes it possible for people to see the struggle against violence in their own situations as part of a necessary and justified resistance against Powers that seek to keep people enslaved to their passions: anger, desire, lust, envy, greed. The mythic framework of the *Gospel of Mary* allows the spiritual, the psychological, the social, the political, and the cosmic to be integrated under one guiding principle: resistance to the unjust and illegitimate domination of ignorant and malevolent Powers.[20] It also offers a strategy for that resistance: preaching the gospel and appropriating the teachings of the Savior in one's own life.

At one level, the *Gospel of Mary* invites the reader to discern the true character of power as it is exercised in the world. It insists that ignorance, deceit, false judgment, and the desire to dominate must be opposed by accepting the Savior's teaching and refusing to be complicit in violence and domination. People need to accept the spiritual freedom, life, and peace that they *already possess* because their true nature is rooted in the Good; the Savior admonishes his disciples to seek and find the child of true Humanity within. Knowing the truth about oneself and opposing the false powers that rule the world are foundational to achieving spiritual maturity and salvation.

At another level, the ascent of the soul can also be read as a guide for following a spiritual path that leads from fear and instability of heart, such as that which the disciples evince after the Savior's departure, to the unwavering faith and peace exemplified by Mary. In this scenario, the Powers represent the forces within the soul that it must overcome. Unfortunately we do not know what it took to overcome the first Power, since its encounter with the soul is lost in a lacuna.

The second Power is overcome by the soul's knowledge of its own spiritual nature. By rejecting the body as the self, it can overcome the false power of desire. The third Power, Ignorance, is overcome by knowledge of the transitory nature of the world. In order for the soul to overcome this power, it must root itself in the Good by abandoning the moral economy of sin and judgment which is tied to the world of the flesh. By turning to the Good, the soul establishes a foundation for the self's identity in what is enduring and true. The final Power is the strongest, a combination of all those the soul had already faced, but now appearing united in the single countenance of Wrath. Its seven names truly reveal the nature of rage: darkness, lust, ignorance, zeal for death; it is the power of the kingdom of the flesh; its "wisdom" is folly; its tools are violence: killing and conquering. But what the soul has come to realize is that violence is impotent. Whereas the Power of Wrath claims that the soul belongs under its domination because the soul itself employs violence by rejecting the body and conquering the Powers, the soul describes these acts as release from death, desire, and ignorance. The soul learns to reject violence by recognizing that it is contrary to the spirit of the Good. The overt violence of wrath cannot harm the soul because the soul does not belong to the kingdom of the flesh but to the Realm of the Good.

As we have seen, the spiritual condition toward which the soul "ascends" is characterized by light, stability of mind, knowledge, and life; the condition it must overcome is described as darkness, desire, ignorance, and death. The true wisdom of the Savior opposes the foolish "wisdom" of the flesh, which thrives on false powers of wrathful judgment and violence. We see these contrasted in the *Gospel of Mary*'s portraits of Peter and Mary. Peter judges and condemns Mary out of his jealousy and inclination to be hot-tempered; because his spiritual sight is clouded, he is unable to see past the transitory distinctions of the flesh to recognize the truth of Mary's teaching. Mary, on the other hand, shows stability of mind and teaches the words of the Savior, bringing comfort and knowledge to the other disciples. The contrast of these two characters illustrates the nature of the soul's inner ascent to spiritual perfection.

The ascent of the soul is an act of transcendence. It is figured as the soul's escape from the suffering of the mortal body and the Powers that seek to bind it. Viewed as a purely external event, ascent could be mere escapism. But before the soul can ascend it must be prepared to face the Powers of Darkness, Desire, Ignorance, and Wrath. This

preparation involves recognizing one's own true spiritual nature, accepting the truth revealed in the teachings of the Savior, rejecting the false ideology of sin and judgment which is tied to domination by the flesh and the passions, and eschewing violence in any form. The capacity to overcome evil requires that one has perceived the Good-beyond-evil and molded oneself to its Image and nature. One has to acquire peace and find the child of true Humanity within, making no laws beyond those laid down by the Savior—lest the laws that are made come to dominate those who made them. Viewed as a purely internal event, ascent could be apolitical and individualistic. Yet the account of the rise of the soul unites internal spiritual development with resistance to external forces of evil in the practice of preaching the gospel to others. In so doing, the *Gospel of Mary* promulgates an alternative vision of the world, one that has the potential to overcome the passions and the violence that separate the soul from God.

Chapter 9

Controversy over Mary's Teaching

Although the *Gospel of Mary* is largely preoccupied with presenting the Savior's teaching, a substantial portion is also taken up with conflict among the disciples. Just before the Savior departed, he had commanded the disciples to go preach the good news. But rather than immediately setting out, they were overcome with distress and weeping, filled with doubt. "How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to preach the good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity" they worried; "If they didn't spare him, how will they spare us?" (*GMary* 5:2-3). Mary at once stepped in to comfort them, turning their heart-mind[1] toward the Good so that they began to discuss the Savior's words. The Greek version says that she "tenderly kissed them all" (5.4).[2] Her words seem to have restored harmony among the apostles.[3] This concord is strengthened when Peter addresses Mary as their "sister" and acknowledges that the Savior had a special affection for her; he asks her to tell them anything the Savior may have told her which the other disciples have not heard. She agrees and gives them an extensive account of a vision and dialogue she had with the Lord. At this point, however, the disciples' concord is shattered by Andrew who breaks in with an accusatory challenge, denying that she could have gotten these teachings from the Savior because

they seem strange to him. Peter is even more contentious, questioning whether the Savior would have spoken to her in private without their knowledge. He apparently cannot accept that the Savior would have withheld such advanced teaching from the male disciples and given it to a woman, expecting them to "turn around and listen to her" (*GMary* 10:4).

Some modern commentators are startled by this sudden antagonism to Mary.[4] Up to this point, the relations among the disciples have seemed quite congenial, even affectionate. Peter himself had readily acknowledged that Mary was Jesus' favorite among women and that there were occasions when Jesus had spoken with her when the other disciples weren't present, yet it would seem that the other disciples—or at least Andrew and Peter—are simply not prepared for Mary's response to Peter's request. It apparently went far beyond Peter's expectations. He had asked Mary only to tell them what the Savior had said to her that the other disciples hadn't heard, but the distinctive teaching she recounted didn't come simply from conversation with Jesus during his life; she had had a vision of the Lord and received advanced teaching from him. In the Coptic version, Mary really rubs it in: she says that she has teaching that has been ***hidden*** from them. It is not a matter of chance that she knows things they do not; it is because the Savior singled her out. The fact that she has received a vision further emphasizes her purity of heart and mind, since according to ancient thought, spiritual experience of this kind would not have been possible without unwavering mental strength and moral purity. The Savior himself acknowledged these qualities in her when he said, "How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me" (*GMary* 7:3).

Now Mary weeps, no doubt disturbed not only because Peter is suggesting that she has made everything up and is deliberately lying to her fellow disciples—whom she had just kissed so tenderly—but Mary is also distressed at the rivalry and animosity his words suggest. At this point Levi steps in, and we may assume that his words express the author's perspective on the situation. Levi's rebuke of Peter is blunt, especially in the Coptic version: He tells Peter not only that he is being hot-headed as usual, but that if he persists he will find himself on the side of their adversaries, the Powers, rather than on the side of the Savior. Although in the Greek version Levi says only that Peter was "questioning the woman as though you're her adversary," it seems to me that the Coptic version has rightly brought out the implication

of Levi's rebuke: divisive rivalry, judgment, and anger are characteristics of the Powers, not of the Savior's true disciples. As Levi insists, the Savior considered Mary worthy, and if he loved her more than the other disciples, it was because he knew her completely. Who did Peter think he was to disregard or reject her? But just as one begins to think that he himself is being belligerent by provoking Peter, Levi shifts to a conciliatory "we": "We should be ashamed," he says, no longer blaming Peter alone but encompassing all the disciples including himself. At stake is not merely the behavior of an individual or two, but the harmony of the whole group and their mission to preach the gospel. Remember that in the Greek version Mary had said that the Savior "has united us and made us Human Beings" (*GMary* 5:8). Repeating the Savior's injunctions, Levi reminds them, "We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human . . . and go forth to preach the gospel, not laying down any rules or laws." And with the departure of Levi (or all the disciples), the gospel comes to an end.

But this abrupt ending is fraught with ambiguity. Did the disciples accept Levi's rebuke? Did they understand Mary's teaching? Were they able to return to harmonious unity and work together, supporting and comforting one another, or did they each go off alone, harboring resentment and misunderstanding? We are not even sure who left to go preach. The Greek version tells us that only Levi left and began to announce the good news. What about the others? Did they just stand there? The Coptic version says "they" started going out to preach. But who was included in this "they"? Mary and Levi? Andrew and Peter? All the disciples? Can we really trust that all these apostles fully understood the Savior's teaching and preached the gospel of the Human One in truth? None of this is answered. We know only the content of the gospel that the author thinks the apostles *should* have preached.

How are we to understand this scene? *The Gospel of Mary* clearly sides with Mary and Levi against Andrew and Peter, but why question Mary's integrity at all if the work wishes to affirm her teaching? And why give the work such an ambiguous ending? Modern commentators have suggested that this scene reflects real conflicts, in which Peter and Mary (or Peter/Andrew and Mary/Levi) represent different positions under debate or different groups in conflict with each other within second century Christianity.[5] They suggest that Mary's teaching and leadership are challenged in the work because they were challenged in reality. But rather than resolve the problem, this solution

raises a host of new questions. Does the final scene in the *Gospel of Mary* reflect actual conflict between the historical figures of Peter and Mary? If so, what were the tensions about? Or were Peter and Mary (Andrew and Levi) only narrative representatives for opposing Christian groups or differing theological positions? If so, who were those groups? What positions did these figures represent? And with each of these questions, we have to ask what was at stake in the conflict. Whose perspective does the *Gospel of Mary* represent? What does the *Gospel of Mary* tell us about Christianity in the second century? We must also recognize that the characters and conflicts represented in this work would no doubt be read differently in later centuries, including our own. How? We'll take up these questions in chapter 14, but before we can answer them, we need to look more closely at how the *Gospel of Mary* describes the issues that are under contention.

The dialogue among the disciples is framed by the Savior's admonition to preach the gospel, beginning with the disciples' fear of the consequences and ending in Levi's exhortation to do as the Savior had commanded. This structural design signals that the main issue concerns preaching the gospel. By portraying most of the disciples as fearful and uncomprehending, even antagonistic, the *Gospel of Mary* clearly raises doubts about whether these disciples are ready to take up the apostolic mission. Their reluctance to preach the gospel indicates that some of the disciples have not understood the Savior's teaching. They are still caught up in the attachment to their bodies and appear to be still under the domination of the Powers who rule the world. They have not found the child of true Humanity within or conformed to the Image of the perfect Human. The attacks of Peter and Andrew on Mary demonstrate even more convincingly that they are still under the sway of passions and false opinions; they have failed to acquire inward peace, and out of jealousy and ignorance are sowing discord among the disciples. How can they preach the gospel of the Realm of the Human One if they do not themselves understand its message? In the absence of an established leadership, a fixed rule of faith, or a canon of scripture, determining the meaning of Jesus' teaching rests almost entirely upon judgments about the reliability of the witnesses who preach it. If the closest disciples of the Savior have not understood his message, how will people ever know what he truly taught? The *Gospel of Mary* has put in question the practice of basing authority solely on claims of having been the Savior's disciple and having received from him a commission to preach the gospel. Even being a witness to the resurrection does not appear to have been sufficient.

The *Gospel of Mary* does, however, portray two disciples as reliable: Mary and Levi. Both work to bring unity and harmony to the group by calling the other disciples back to consideration of the words of the Savior. Mary in particular is portrayed as a model disciple, comforting the other disciples and offering advanced teaching from the Savior. Both her steadfastness and her vision of the Savior demonstrate the strength of her spiritual character. It is no accident that the Savior loved her more than the others; that love and esteem is based on his sure knowledge of her. More than any other disciple, she has comprehended the Savior's teaching and is capable of teaching and preaching the gospel to others. She shows no fear at the prospect of going forth to preach because she understands how the soul overcomes the passions and advances past the Powers that attempt to dominate it. The *Gospel of Mary*'s portrayal of Mary and Levi makes it evident that demonstrable spiritual maturity is the crucial criterion for legitimate authority. The spiritual character of the persons who preach is the ultimate and most reliable basis for judging the truth of the gospel that is preached.

This criterion fits well with ancient expectations. As we said above, teachers were supposed to manifest their teaching in their actions, providing instruction not only by what they said but by how they lived. The personal character of the teacher was considered to be fundamental to his or her capacity to instruct. (And yes, albeit few in numbers, women teachers of philosophy were known in antiquity.[6]) We have to remember too that when the *Gospel of Mary* was written, no rule of faith or fixed canon had yet become commonly accepted. In the early centuries, Christians often based claims for the truth of their gospel on demonstrations of the power of the Spirit in prophecy and healing or in high standards of moral living. Thus representing the steadfast and irenic character of Mary and Levi would go a long way toward establishing the *Gospel of Mary*'s authority.

The *Gospel of Mary* seems most concerned with challenges to the truth of its teaching by other apostles within the Christian community. If Andrew and Peter are examples, those challenges were basically of two kinds: 1) the rejection of new teachings based on prophecy or private revelation, and 2) gender. We know from other Christian writings of the first and second centuries that these were very real issues in this period. Irenaeus, for example, denied that the apostles possessed hidden mysteries that had been delivered to them in private,[7] and he charged the heretics with inventing and preaching their own fictions.[8] So, too, Mary understood Peter's accusation to

imply that she had made up everything she was reporting. The *Gospel of Mary* defends her against these charges through Levi's defense and the portrait of her character. Levi's two-pronged defense of Mary begins by attacking Peter's character: Peter, well-known as a hot-head, is sowing division among the apostles themselves. He then affirms that the Savior knew Mary completely and loved her best. And just as Levi considers the Savior's judgment of Mary to be decisive in ending the dispute, so the *Gospel of Mary* affirms her teaching by emphasizing the strength of her relationship to the Savior. That the Savior judged her rightly is illustrated by the work's portrait of her as an unflinching and steadfast disciple, worthy of receiving visions and advanced teaching. Levi's defense is at once remarkable and unremarkable. Unremarkable because the standards for legitimacy are those found widely in the earliest literature: apostolic witness to the resurrection and the demonstration of spiritual gifts, in Mary's case prophetic visions and inspired teaching. Yet because all the apostles in the text can claim to be witnesses to the teaching ministry of Jesus, both before and after his resurrection, and all received his commission to go forth and preach the gospel, her qualifications are not sufficient to defend her from attacks by fellow apostles. The crux of the defense, then, rests on the remarkable intimacy of Mary's relationship to the Savior: as Levi states, he did love her more than the other disciples. The fact that Andrew's objection to the "strangeness" of Mary's teaching is never explicitly answered leaves the issue he raises in the hands of the reader. As I have suggested above, there are multiple points of contact between the content of the revelation to Mary and the Savior's teaching earlier in the work; but ultimately the reader will have to decide whether they are sufficient to exonerate her or not.

The second challenge to Mary's authority as a teacher and apostle concerns gender, an issue that is explicitly raised in the text three times. In the first instance, Peter says to Mary: "We know that the Savior loved you *more than the rest of women*" (*GMary* 6:1). The second time, Peter protests, "Did (the Savior) speak with a *woman* in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to *her*? Did he choose *her over us*?" (10:3–4). Finally, Levi responds: "Peter . . . I see you now contending against the *woman* like the Adversaries" (10:8). The repeated references to Mary's womanhood makes it clear that at least one aspect of Peter's problem was that she was a woman. He apparently had no difficulty with the fact that Jesus preferred her to other women, but he couldn't accept the

fact that Jesus preferred her to the male disciples—or even worse that they would have to "turn around" and accept instruction from a woman. Levi's response shows that he recognized that Peter's problem had to do at least in part with Mary being a woman, and he makes it clear that the Savior did indeed love her more and gave her special teaching because she, a woman, was worthy. He thereby implies, of course, that she was indeed more worthy than they were.

The issue of gender is raised not merely to score a point in the interminable battle of the sexes. Mary's gender is also crucial to the *Gospel of Mary*'s theology, especially the teaching about the body and salvation. As we said above, for the *Gospel of Mary* bodily distinctions are irrelevant to spiritual character since the body is not the true self. Even as God is non-gendered, immaterial, and transcendent, so too is the true Human self.[9] The Savior tells his disciples that they get sick and die "because you love what deceives you" (*GMary* 3:7–8). Peter's fault lies in his inability to see past the distinctions of the flesh to the spiritual qualities necessary for leadership. He apparently "loves" the status his male sex-gender gives him, and that leads to pride and jealousy. The scene where Levi corrects Peter's ignorance helps the reader to see one of the primary ways in which people are deceived by the body. Authority should not be based on whether one is a man or a woman, let alone on roles of socially assigned gender and sexual reproduction, but on spiritual achievement. Those who have progressed further than others have the responsibility to care and instruct them. The claim to have known Jesus and heard his words was not enough. One had to have appropriated them in one's life. Leadership is for those who have sought and found the child of true Humanity; they are to point the way for others, even as the Savior did. And such persons can be women as well as men. According to the *Gospel of Mary*, those who fail to understand this fact are, like Peter, mired in the materiality and passions of their lower natures. Worse yet, they risk finding themselves on the side of the Adversaries, for those who oppose women's spiritual leadership do so out of false pride, jealousy, lack of understanding, spiritual immaturity, and contentiousness. Rejecting the body as the self opened up the possibility of an ungendered space within the Christian community in which leadership functions were based on spiritual maturity.[10]

The *Gospel of Mary* takes two very strong positions concerning the basis of authority: that spiritual maturity, demonstrated by prophetic experience and steadfastness of mind, is more reliable than

mere apostolic lineage in interpreting apostolic tradition, and that the basis for leadership should be spiritual maturity not a person's sex. On those foundations rest not only its claims to possess the true understanding of Jesus' teachings, but also to have a vision of Christian community and mission that reflected the Savior's own model as a teacher and mediator of salvation.

Further, its portrait of Mary offers an alternative to sole reliance on apostolic witness as the source of authority. Although she, too, knew the historical Jesus, was a witness to the resurrection, and received instruction from the Savior, these experiences are not what set her apart from the others. Throughout the *Gospel*, Mary is clearly portrayed as an exemplary disciple. She doesn't falter when the Savior departs. She steps into his place after his departure, comforting, strengthening, and instructing the others. Her spiritual comprehension and maturity are demonstrated in her calm behavior and especially in her visionary experience. These at once provide evidence of her spiritual maturity and form the basis for her legitimate exercise of authority in instructing the other disciples. She does not teach in her own name, but passes on the words of the Savior, calming the disciples and turning their hearts toward the Good. Her character proves the truth of her revelation and by extension authorizes the teaching of the *Gospel of Mary*—and it does so by opposing those apostles who reject women's authority and preach another gospel, laying down laws beyond those which the Savior determined.

Part III

The Gospel of Mary in Early Christianity

Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525

Chapter 10

The Jesus Tradition

Readers acquainted with the New Testament will find much that seems familiar in the *Gospel of Mary*: the characters of the Savior, Peter, and Mary; the vocabulary of gospel, kingdom, and law; and the post-resurrection scenario[1] in which the Savior meets with his disciples, commissions them to preach and teach, and then departs. Yet they will also encounter striking differences: unfamiliar terms and ideas appear and the Savior's words are sometimes puzzling. Usually scholars explain the similarities by assuming that the *Gospel of Mary* borrowed from or was influenced by the New Testament gospels and at least some of the letters; they characterize the differences in terms of deviance from the canonical norm. But this picture is not accurate, for it misrepresents the dynamics of early Christian life and practice.

As I noted earlier, the *Gospel of Mary* was written before the canon had been established. At that time there was keen debate over the meaning of Jesus' teachings and his importance for salvation. And because Jesus himself did not write, all our portraits of him reflect the perspectives of early Christians. Since the end of the eighteenth-century, historians have been asking how those portraits developed.[2] After long and painstaking investigation, they have constructed the following picture[3]: Jesus said and did some things that were remembered and passed down orally. People did not repeat everything he

said and did, but only what was particularly memorable or distinctive, especially what was of use in the early churches for preaching, teaching, ritual practices, and other aspects of community life. His parables and his sayings (called aphorisms) were often so striking, so pithy and memorable, that they were repeated again and again. A saying like "Blessed are the poor," for example, would surely have struck people as remarkable—for who thinks poverty is a blessing! In the process of being passed down, his words and deeds were interpreted and elaborated. The *Gospel of Matthew*, for example, interpreted the saying about poverty allegorically: "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*" (*Matt* 5:3); while the *Gospel of Luke* read it as a pronouncement against injustices tied to wealth and greed: "But *woe to you who are rich*, for you have received your consolation" (*Luke* 6:24). Some materials were adapted to fit the needs of developing communities for worship or mission; others were elaborated to address new situations that arose. Some sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels came from early Christian prophets who claimed to have received revealed teaching from the Lord in the Spirit—for the early churches did not necessarily distinguish between the words of the historical Jesus and the revelation of the risen Christ to inspired prophets. Traditions about Jesus were used and passed down primarily in oral form as part of the living practice of early Christians. As Helmut Koester writes, "Sayings of Jesus were known because they had been established as parts of a Christian catechism; the passion narrative was known because it was embedded into the Christian liturgy."[4] Gradually various elements of oral tradition were frozen in writing, sometimes as a collection of Jesus' words like the *Gospel of Thomas* or *Q*, sometimes in a narrative like the *Gospel of Mark*.

These writings give us glimpses of how the Jesus tradition was being used and interpreted by the earliest Christians, but it would be historically incorrect to think they reflect the full breadth of early Christian interpretation of that tradition. While recent discoveries like the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Thomas* have started to fill in some gaps, they also prove that theological reflections in the first centuries of Christian beginnings were much more diverse and varied than we had ever realized. Moreover, only a few of the many writings by early Christians have survived. And even if all the early Christian literature *had* been preserved, those written sources would represent only a fraction of the full story, because the gospel was spread primarily by mouth and ear: it was preached and heard. Most people in the ancient

world could neither read nor write. Christian ideas and practices developed in the primarily oral contexts of evangelizing, prayer and worship, preaching and prophesying. The sounds of those voices are lost to us forever.

Nor did the written gospels play the same role in early Christian life that they have in our own literate, print societies. Again and again in antiquity we hear that people were suspicious of books. Indeed, when Irenaeus argued for the authority of the four gospels in the late second century, he had to counter the views of Christians who claimed that "truth was not transmitted by means of written documents, but in living speech; and that for this reason Paul declares, 'We speak wisdom among the perfect but not the wisdom of this cosmos'."[5] True teaching was communicated directly through speech, and the most powerful and authoritative kind of speech was prophetic revelation—the divine voice, with the power to create the universe, reaching into people's lives through inspired teachers and prophets.

Moreover, as the literary sources that have survived were copied and passed on, they were sometimes altered to suit new situations and theological demands. A striking example of this can be seen in the literary relationships among the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*. The overwhelming majority of historical-critical scholars maintains that the authors of *Luke* and *Matthew* knew the *Gospel of Mark* and adapted it to fit their own interpretations of Jesus' teaching and ministry.[6] Not only that, but materials could easily be added on to the end of works, like the final saying in the *Gospel of Thomas* (114) or the longer ending to the *Gospel of Mark* (16:9–20), to say nothing of both intentional and accidental changes that undoubtedly occurred in the process of manually copying the manuscripts.[7] By the beginning of the second century, these processes had resulted in a highly diverse body of gospel material all claiming to present the words and deeds of Jesus.

For over a century, scholars have sought to reach behind these diverse portraits to discern what the historical Jesus really said and did, as well as how early Christians elaborated and interpreted that heritage. One tool they have developed to further this task is source criticism, which seeks to determine which texts were known and used in writing later works. The operative assumption is that the earliest sources would be closest to first-hand accounts and therefore historically and theologically the most reliable, while the later a gospel was written the less reliable it would be. The *Gospel of Mark*, for example,

is considered to be the first written gospel and therefore scholars have relied upon it heavily in their attempts to paint historical portraits of Jesus. Later gospels are seen to be valuable for research on the historical Jesus only when they offer new, independent information that goes back to the earliest period. Enormous labors have gone into this enterprise because so much is at stake for theological politics. To claim that one's beliefs rest on the sure foundation of Jesus' teachings and deeds is a powerful assertion of theological legitimacy. To claim that a gospel's teaching deviates from that foundation is an implicit assertion that it is heretical. At stake is the whole basis of Christian orthodoxy and normative Christian identity.

The attempt to determine whether or not the author of the *Gospel of Mary* knew the New Testament texts is therefore not a neutral exercise, but one fraught with theological consequences. From the beginning, assertions that the *Gospel of Mary* is heretical rested upon assertions that it was a late composition both dependent upon and deviant from the New Testament. By measuring its theology against the later established norms of canon and creed, scholars impugned its theological value. Robert McL. Wilson, for example, in a brief study on "The New Testament in the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary*" concluded that "The *Gospel of Mary* presents clear allusions to all four Gospels, in addition to some that are more doubtful. There are two possible references to the First Epistle of John, and Levi's reference to 'putting on the perfect man' seems to recall Ephesians and Colossians."[8] This dependence upon later sources indicated to him that the *Gospel of Mary* was not a reliable witness to the earliest Jesus tradition and, moreover, in his judgment its novel ideas established its deviant character. Thus the *Gospel of Mary* was deemed to be historically unreliable and theologically heretical.

We have to ask two questions: First, is it true that the *Gospel of Mary* is dependent upon New Testament sources? Second, is it legitimate to judge its teaching to be heretical based on comparison with later norms of orthodoxy? The second question will be considered in chapter 14; this chapter and those that follow will inquire more carefully into its possible relationships to other early Christian traditions, especially those represented in the New Testament gospels and Paul.

The Jesus Tradition in the Gospel of Mary

The initial problem with Wilson's conclusion is that in the absence of direct citations it is not at all clear where the author of the *Gospel of*

Mary derived its material about the Savior's teachings. Even Wilson concluded that "the writer's practice is to make use of echoes rather than quotations. . . . There are few full citations, and no real attempt at exegesis; rather are the allusions worked into the text, and it is sometimes difficult to identify the source."[9] Many of the "echoes" in the *Gospel of Mary* can be traced to the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition and were widely dispersed throughout early Christian literature. Sayings like "Anyone with two ears to hear should listen" or "seek and you will find" could have come from any number of literary sources or oral traditions. In addition, since none of the supposed citations shows evidence of the distinctive language of any particular gospel author, it is impossible to be sure which if any gospels may have been known to the writer of the *Gospel of Mary*. By the early second century, the terminology, themes, characters, and narrative structure of the Jesus story were part of the shared thought-world of early Christians, and the *Gospel of Mary*'s use of language was typical of this idiom of Christian theological reflection.[10]

Moreover it is impossible to imagine that the interpretation of the Jesus tradition in the *Gospel of Mary* arose as a "deviation" from the New Testament. The *Gospel of Mary* itself claims to rely directly upon apostolic witnesses to the Savior's teaching after the resurrection. Its authority is based on direct revelation of the Savior, and it appeals to the apostolic witness of Mary Magdalene. We cannot, however, take this claim at face value since it was standard procedure for Christians to ascribe their beliefs to apostles; the New Testament gospels and several of the epistles are well-known examples of this practice.[11] As we will see below, the evidence instead suggests that the *Gospel of Mary* developed an early, independent interpretation of the Jesus tradition within a Gentile Christian context. It knows of other interpretations, but it does not draw upon them as sources for its own teaching; rather when it alludes to other early Christian traditions, it does so primarily to oppose them. Therefore, we should not imagine that the author of the *Gospel of Mary* sat down and read the New Testament gospels and letters, and from those sources generated its interpretation of the Jesus tradition. It is much more conceivable that the author was drawing upon other oral or literary sources, now lost to us, in which the sayings of Jesus were already being understood in terms of popular Platonizing cosmology and Stoic ethics. At the same time, the *Gospel of Mary* evinces a knowledge of alternative traditions, some of which it agrees with and some of which it opposes.

In order to account for both the similarities of the *Gospel of Mary* to other early Christian writings and its distinctive theological development, it is necessary to move away from source criticism. The reason is that this method tends to conceive of literary relationships in static and passive terms, as imitation, borrowing, influence, or some such reiteration of the past. New approaches, collectively called intertextuality, focus instead upon the ways in which authors absorb, transform, or transgress the traditions they appropriate. They tend to stress the ways that authors allude to prior written and oral materials in contexts of struggle. Each work labors to displace other interpretations in order to supersede them. This kind of practice is not so much a question of influence or borrowing as it is a matter of confrontation; authors shape meaning by resituating known materials in ways that can at once present their own views and displace prior readings. The *Gospel of Mary* is replete with evidence of this kind of struggle. The most apparent example is the conflict among the disciples over Mary's revelation, but intertextual analysis shows that even the words of the Savior are shaped by constantly referring the reader beyond the text to alternative interpretations it is seeking to displace. It is as though the Savior is making asides designed specifically to counter other, erroneous interpretations of his sayings. We can never be sure precisely what the author knew or intended, or what associations early readers might have, for we could well be making links that they did not[12]; nevertheless, we can spell out the intertextual allusions we hear that may have been options for ancient readers as well. This procedure is at least an advance over the methods that privilege the New Testament canon in a way early Christians did not, since no fixed canon existed in the first and second centuries.

Let's take as an example *GMary* 4, which Wilson characterizes as "a 'farewell discourse' woven from New Testament texts."[13] Just before the Savior departed, he delivered a short speech, consisting of three parts: peace, warning and admonition, and commission to preach. All three allude to material familiar from other Christian literature, but in the *Gospel of Mary* the order, sequence, and meaning of the sayings are distinctively different. Compare, for example, his greeting of peace with that in other texts:

- *GMary* 4:1: "When the Blessed One had said this, he greeted them all. 'Peace be with you!' he said. 'Acquire my peace within yourselves!'"

- *John* 14:27: "'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.'"
- *John* 20:19: "Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.'"
- *John* 20:21: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.'"
- *John* 20:26: "The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, 'Peace be with you.'"
- *Luke* 24:36: "And as they were saying this, Jesus stood among them and said to them, 'Peace to you!'"[14]
- *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III) 90:14–91:2, 10–12, 20–23: "After he rose from the dead, his twelve disciples and seven women continued to be his followers and went to Galilee onto the mountain called 'Divination and Joy.'... The Savior appeared, not in his previous form, but in the invisible spirit. ... And he said, 'Peace be to you! My peace I give to you!'" (After a long dialogue, the Savior commissions the disciples to preach.)
- *Letter of Peter to Philip* 140:15-23: "Then Jesus appeared saying to them, 'Peace to you [all] and everyone who believes in my name. And when you depart, joy be to you and grace and power. And be not afraid; behold, I am with you forever.'" (Then the apostles go out to preach, in peace.)

The greeting of peace is common in much ancient literature, and ancient readers may immediately have connected it with a variety of genres and milieus (epistolary greetings, farewells, and so on).[15] In the Christian gospels and dialogue literature, however, the greeting of peace consistently introduces an appearance of Jesus to the disciples. It appears to have become a kind of signal for special instruction or a commissioning, almost always in the context of a post-resurrection appearance.[16] The author may reasonably have expected readers to interpret the Savior's greeting in the *Gospel of Mary* as such a signal.[17] But if they did, their expectation receives a startling twist because the Savior tells them to "acquire my peace *within yourselves.*" That they were not prepared for. The *Gospel of Mary* emphasizes the interiority of the peace in a way that is missing in the other accounts. Elsewhere, the peace is meant to allay their fears, whether because they are startled by the epiphany of the risen Savior in their midst or because they

need comfort in the face of his impending death (*John* 14:27). But here the command of the Savior relates directly to finding the child of true Humanity within.

That difference leads to the warning that follows: "Be on your guard so that no one lead you astray, saying 'Look over here! or Look over there!' For the child of true Humanity exists within you" (*GMary* 4:3-5). Here, too, the author may reasonably have expected readers to make connections with similarly phrased warnings in other texts:

- *Mark* 13:5-6, 9 (cf. *Matt* 24:4-5; *Luke* 21:8): And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.... But take heed to yourselves."
- *Mark* 13:21–26 (cf. *Matt* 24:15–24, 29–30; *Luke* 21:25–27): "And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand. But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."
- *Q* 17:22–24 (cf. *Luke* 17:22–24; *Matt* 24:26–27): And he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Lo, here,' or 'Lo, there.' Do not go out, do not follow. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day."
- *Luke* 17:20–21: Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in you."
- *GThom* 3: "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside of you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will under-

stand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

- *GThom* 113b: "(The kingdom) will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there.' Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

The structural similarities are key. Except for *Mark* 13:5–6, each saying is composed of three parts:

1. some formulation that places the readers in opposition to others, either as an explicit warning (against false leaders, prophets, or messiahs) or in an implicit controversy setting (as when the Pharisees ask Jesus a question in *Luke* 17:20–21).
2. the formula: 'lo, here' 'lo, there.'
3. a statement about the true location or arrival of the Son of Man or the kingdom.

The first part is always composed to fit the saying into the work's narrative context, and identifies those of whom the readers should be wary. Note that most opponents are identified only in very general terms: "no one," "anyone," "they." The aim is to counter any opposition, wherever it comes from. This generality allows readers to determine for themselves who the opponents are, supplying more definite connections with opponents from their own local contexts, even though it would appear from what follows that the *Gospel of Mary* has apocalyptic prophets especially in mind. And here the phrasing makes it appear that the Savior does not foment controversy, but only guards the truth. The second part of the saying is almost identical in all the sources, and hence is the core of the allusion. It is the third part that is always the clincher, for here one finds out the truth:

- *GMary*: The child of true Humanity is within you.
- *Mark*: They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.
- *Q*: For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.
- *Luke*: The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.
- *GThom* 3: The kingdom is within you and it is outside of you.

- *GThom* 113: The kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.

The sayings in *Mark* and *Q* appear in apocalyptic contexts where Jesus is describing the travail of the last days and the future coming of the Son of Man. He is warning his disciples against false messiahs and prophets who will lead believers astray. But according to the Savior in the *Gospel of Mary*, those who say that the Son of Man is coming to save you are leading you astray! The warning is directed against anyone who claims that an external power will deliver them. Rather they are to look within themselves for the "Son of Man" because the key to salvation lies in understanding the Savior's teaching about the true nature of Humanity and the self. Here "Son of Man" does not refer to an apocalyptic Savior coming at some future time to usher in the eschatological kingdom; it refers to the Image of humanity's essential spiritual nature located within the self. In any case, "Son of Man" is never used in the *Gospel of Mary* to refer to the Savior. It is not difficult to conclude that the author of the *Gospel of Mary* has formulated this saying specifically against the kind of apocalyptic expectations that appear in *Mark* and *Q*, but the modality is at most by implication, not direct attack. Regardless of whatever the author's intention may have been, any reader familiar with apocalyptic Son of Man theology would have made the connection and seen the critique.

But perhaps the reader would instead have been reminded of sayings like those in *Luke* 17:20–21 or *GThom* 3 and 113. They are closer in meaning to the *Gospel of Mary*, and provide evidence of a relatively widespread alternative tradition within early Christianity. The author of *Luke* declares that the kingdom is already present. Believers do not need to wait for its coming because it is present in the mission of Jesus and the establishment of the Spirit-filled church. The *Gospel of Thomas* agrees that Jesus' teaching exposes the presence of the kingdom, but it locates the kingdom in creation. It does not look forward to the end of the world, but backward to *Genesis* to imagine the perfection of God's kingdom.[18] Both the world and humanity—made in the image and likeness of God—reveal the Divine Realm. *GThom* 113 says that the kingdom is already spread out upon the earth, if people only have the spiritual capacity to see it. *GThom* 3 further suggests that people have been looking in the wrong places, even as the author of *Deut* 30:10–14 had admonished his readers:

> ... turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it down?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

The kingdom is not in sky or the sea; rather God's Realm is already present within oneself and in creation. Yet while these sayings appear somewhat similar to the teaching of the *Gospel of Mary*, both *Luke* and *Thomas'* gospels speak of the presence of God's Realm rather than the Son of Man or the child of true Humanity. The *Gospel of Mary* at once nods toward other traditions while displacing them and decentering their teaching about the Realm of God.

After telling the disciples that the child of true Humanity is within, the Savior commands them, "Follow it!" (*GMary* 4:6). Here again the reader may think of other instances in which the command to follow was given, such as:

- *Mark* 8:34b (cf. *Matt* 16:24; *Luke* 9:23): And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."
- *Q* 14:27 (*Luke* 14:27; *Matt* 10:38): "Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciples."

In both these cases, the command to follow is directly connected with the cross. In the *Gospel of Mark*, the injunction to follow Jesus occurs immediately after he predicts his death and resurrection, and is explicitly interpreted in terms of the discipleship of the cross: those who follow Jesus can expect to suffer trials and persecution, even death. In *Q*, the saying links discipleship with the dangerous mission of preaching the gospel; the missionary will need to abandon family and accept the possibility of persecution. The message of the *Gospel of Mary* is quite different. Although the disciples seem fully aware of

Jesus' death and the possibility of their own martyrdom (*GMary* 5:1–3), the command to follow is not connected with the cross and suffering discipleship or even with preaching the gospel. Instead they are exhorted to locate the child of true Humanity within and follow it.[19] If Mary is any example, following the Human One will lead them to fearlessness, stability of character, and eventually to rest.

Similarly the command to seek and find has a substantially different meaning in the *Gospel of Mary* because it is associated with finding the child of true Humanity within.

- *GMary* 4:7: "Those who search for it will find it!"
- *Q* 11:9–10 (cf. *Luke* 11:9-10; *Matt* 7:7–8): "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."
- *GThom* 2 (cf. POxy 654.2): "Let whoever seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All."
- *GThom* 94: "Whoever seeks will find, and [whoever knocks] will be let in."
- *John* 7:34, 36: "You will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come."
- *John* 13:33: "Yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and as I said to the Jews so I am saying now to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'"
- *GThom* 38: "There will be days when you look for me and will not find me."
- *GThom* 92: "Seek and you will find. Yet, what you asked me about in former times and which I did not tell you then, now I do desire to tell, but you do not inquire after it."
- *DSav* 126:6–11 "His [disciples said, Lord], who is it who seeks, and [...] reveals? [The lord said to them,] 'He who seeks [...] reveal ...[...]."
- *DSav* 129:15 "And [let] whoever [...] seek and find and [rejoice]."

The saying "seek and you will find" is at once simple and enigmatic. What is it that one is supposed to seek and find? Early Christians answered this question in a variety of ways. *Q*, *Luke*, and *Matthew* understood it to be an assurance of the efficacy of prayer. *GThom* 2

understood seeking and finding to be the first two stages in the process of salvation (followed by being troubled, being amazed, and finally ruling over the entire creation). In the *Gospel of Mary*, the assurance that "They who seek (the child of true Humanity within) will find it" is part of its distinctive theology that locates the child of true Humanity within.

In addition to the parallels listed above, the *Dialogue of the Savior* offers important thematic similarities to the *Gospel of Mary*. Indeed Helmut Koester has suggested that the dialogue in *Dialogue of the Savior* is

> a commentary on the eschatological time table which is implied in Gos. Thom. 2. The disciples have sought and have found; but their rule and their rest will only appear in the future. At the present time, the 'rulers' of the cosmos still exercise their authority, and the time at which the disciples will rule over them has not yet come (Dial. Sav. ##47–50). The rest can only be obtained when they can rid themselves of the burden of their bodies (Dial. Sav. #28). Mary, who recognizes this, is praised as a disciple who has understood the all (Dial. Sav. #53).[20]

If Koester is correct, we may be able to see here thematic connections among the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. All three works understand the process of salvation as seeking and finding, overcoming the rule of the Powers (or 'rulers'), leaving the body, and obtaining rest, and all give Mary Magdalene a prominent role. The only significant difference lies in the *Gospel of Mary*'s rejection of ruling as an eschatological goal. These works show that the kind of theology encountered in the *Gospel of Mary* was not entirely distinctive, and some readers may have been acquainted with this kind of theological reflection already.

Moreover Koester has pointed out that the theme of seeking and finding is crucial to the *Gospel of John* as well.[21] There, he argues, it serves a polemic against the kind of Christology that portrayed Jesus primarily as a teacher.[22] Koester concludes:

> It is evident that, for the *Gospel of John*, seeking Jesus—not seeking for the meaning of his words—is the central theme. For both the crowds and for the disciples, the mystery of the

> seeking after Jesus is captured in the statement of John 7:34 and 36: "You will seek me and not find me, and where I am you cannot come." In John 13:33, the disciples are confronted with the same mystery: "Yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and as I said to the Jews so I am saying now to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" As far as the hostile crowds are concerned, their inability to find Jesus could simply be explained as the result of their unbelief. However, for the disciples too, the question of being with Jesus after his departure, and reaching the place to which he is going, is central for continuing belief in him. The farewell discourses of the Gospel of John are concerned with this question, because a Gnostic answer was already at hand: those who are prepared spiritually can follow the redeemer to the heavenly realms.[23]

Koester's argument can be easily extended to include the *Gospel of Mary*. It, too, contains the kind of theological reflection that the author of *John* would surely have opposed had he known it. The Savior's revelation teaches the disciples how to prepare themselves to ascend to the heavenly Realm by seeking and finding the child of true Humanity within. Readers who made these intertextual associations would not have understood them in terms of borrowing or influence, but as differing, even conflicting meanings of Jesus' command to seek and find.

The Savior wishes the disciples to find the child of true Humanity within so as to prepare themselves to go forth and preach the gospel. He commissions them to go out, cautioning them against setting excessive rules and laws.

- *GMary* 4:8–10: (The Savior commissions his disciples): "Go then and preach the gospel of the kingdom. Do not lay down any rules beyond what I ordained for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else it will dominate you."
- *GMary* 5:1–3: (After the Savior's departure, the disciples) were distressed and wept greatly. "How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to preach the good news of the Realm of the child of Humanity" (the gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man)?" they said. "If they didn't spare him, how will they spare us?"

- *GMary* 10:11–13 (BG): (Levi admonishes the other disciples): "Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Human and acquire him for ourselves as he commanded us, and preach the gospel, not setting down any other rule or law that differs from what the Savior said."
- *GMary* 10:11–13 (PRyl 463): "Rather let us be ashamed and, clothing ourselves with the [perfect] Human, let us do what we were commanded. Let us proclaim the gospel as the Savior said, not laying down any rules or making laws."
- *Matt* 24:14 (cf. *Mark* 13:10; *Luke* 21:13): (Jesus tells his disciples): "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come."
- *Mark* 16:15: And (Jesus) said to (the disciples), "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation."
- *Matt* 28:18–20: And Jesus came and said to (the eleven disciples), "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."
- *Luke* 24:45–48: Then (Jesus) opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."
- *John* 15:16: (In his farewell discourse, Jesus says): "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."
- *John* 17:18: (Jesus prays to the Father): "As thou did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Except in the *Gospel of John*, all examples of the commissioning are part of the farewell message of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection but before his final departure. In *Matthew*, the preaching of the gospel is meant to fill the time before the end; in *Luke* it signals the beginning of the age of the Spirit-filled church. In *John*, no specific commissioning is reported, although references to bearing fruit and

being sent into the world are mentioned in Jesus' farewell discourse. The *Gospel of Mary* also sets the commissioning in the Savior's final words, but the gospel does not end with his departure; instead the Savior's admonition to preach the gospel becomes the central topic of discussion among the disciples. As we explored in more detail in chapter 9 above, the entire second half of the *Gospel of Mary* is taken up with exploring the question of who is able to meet the demands of apostleship and preach the gospel in truth.

As Ann Pasquier has pointed out, the order of the Savior's farewell speech in the *Gospel of Mary* indicates a distinctive theological perspective.[24] First the Savior cautions the disciples to guard themselves against error; then he affirms the presence of the child of true Humanity within them; and only then does he commission them to go preach the gospel. This order, Pasquier notes, is the reverse of the *Gospel of Matthew*, where the Savior first says that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the nations (24:14); then he warns the disciples to guard against error (24:23–26); and finally he assures them of the coming of the Son of Man (24:27). The effect in *Matthew* is to see the preaching of the gospel as a precondition for the coming of the Son of Man and the last judgment. In the *Gospel of Mary*, however, the presence of the Son of Man within is the basis for preaching the kingdom. The *Gospel of Mary*'s sequence completely undercuts the apocalyptic message of *Matthew* and replaces it with a call to discover and preach the gospel of the Realm of the child of true Humanity. Readers who compare the two works will perceive conflicting pictures of the Savior's teaching.

The *Gospel of Mary* also provides an answer to the question of who can preach the gospel that differs from the other gospel accounts. The response of the disciples to the departure of the risen Savior contrasts sharply with that represented in parallel scenes in *John*, *Luke*, or *Mark*. In *John*, Mary speaks first, the male disciples are afraid, and then Jesus comes (20:18–19). The reverse order found in the *Gospel of Mary* highlights the way in which Mary assumes the Savior's role in bringing comfort and instruction after his departure. In *Luke*, the disciples are filled with joy after Jesus departs (24:52–53); in *Mark*, they immediately go forth and preach the gospel (16:20); in *John*, it is Jesus who comforts the disciples before his death. In the *Gospel of Mary*, however, after the Savior's departure all the disciples except Mary Magdalene are distressed and weeping—behavior more like the reaction of the disciples at Jesus' arrest (*Mark* 14:50) or during the trial

(*Mark* 14:66–72). In particular, they fear for their lives; "If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?" (*GMary* 5:3). Of course the disciples' fear for their lives was a real and immediate issue widely addressed in early Christian literature, usually within the context of persecution.[25] But in other narratives Jesus has already offered encouragement and comfort before his departure, and the disciples go forth with joy and confidence. In *Acts*, for example, the disciples are portrayed as fearless in their preaching. Or again, the other gospels place Peter's hot-headed behavior and triple denial before the resurrection, while in the *Gospel of Mary* he continues to behave this way even after the Savior departs.

The reader of the *Gospel of Mary* has to wonder what kind of gospel such disciples will preach. Their doubt and fear show they have failed to acquire inward peace. How can they preach the gospel if they do not understand it? They think that following the Savior will lead them to suffering—as *Mark* 13:9–13 insists that it will—but in the *Gospel of Mary* their fear only demonstrates that they have not fully comprehended the Savior's teaching. Since attachment to the body is the source of suffering and death (*GMary* 3:7–11), separation from that attachment frees them: there is no promise of, or desire for a physical resurrection.[26] The conclusion of the *Gospel of Mary* leaves the reader with little confidence that these disciples, especially Peter and Andrew, will be able to preach the gospel of the Realm. And since, as we have noted, the *Gospel of Mary* questions the validity of apostolic succession and authority, it is little wonder that later orthodox theologians, who founded their own authority upon apostolic reliability, would decry the *Gospel of Mary* as heresy. Irenaeus, for example, excoriated those who criticized the apostles: "For it is unlawful to assert that they preached before they possessed perfect knowledge, as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles."[27] But Irenaeus was only one man. Other Christians may have thought differently, dismayed by the ever increasing division expressed in theological polemics and distressed by new laws that functioned only to condemn the views of other Christians.

In every case we have examined, the meaning and function of the Savior's farewell speech is enriched by examining the possible intertextual relations to other early Christian literature and theology. To the degree that readers were conscious of these allusions, they would have understood them in terms of intra-Christian controversy rather than literary dependence, borrowing, or influence. To under-

stand early Christianity, it is crucial to recall that no account of Jesus' words and deeds has come down to us uninterpreted: since he did not himself write anything, there is no direct path back to the historical Jesus. All gospel literature attests first and foremost to the theology and practice of early Christians, all our portraits of Jesus come filtered through the lenses of early Christians' beliefs and practices, and all were forged in dialogue with other views.

Appendix: Criteria for Determining Literary Dependence

In order to appreciate the intertextual approach used above—and illustrate my intertextual dialogue with source critical approaches—let me elaborate on my own conclusions resulting from the use of the source method. Very little source-critical research has been done on the *Gospel of Mary,* in part because scholars have generally assumed that the author knew and used all four canonical gospels and at least some Pauline literature.[28] Initially, I too held this position, and indeed my own published work to date reflects that assumption.[29] But the more I tried to interpret the *Gospel of Mary* from this perspective, the more problems I saw. I now argue that the application of this method to the *Gospel of Mary* shows that it presents an interpretation of the early Jesus tradition that is independent of any known literary work. While it offers no new information about the historical Jesus, it does provide evidence of a type of early Christian theological reflection previously known only from such detractors as Irenaeus.

Scholars employing historical-critical methods have developed several criteria for determining whether or not a work knew and used another literary work. Internal literary factors are the most important criteria. The usual indicators of literary dependence include the following:

- extensive word-for-word similarity (citation)
- similar arrangement or ordering of materials
- similar narrative context or setting
- the use of a citation formula (e.g., "As it is written . . ." or "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah . . .")
- use of language specific to the source work[30]

The more fully a work demonstrates these literary indicators, the more likely it is dependent.[31]

It is also important to consider external factors, such as the rate of literacy in antiquity and the nature of literary composition in a chirographic culture, that is, one in which writing exists but is largely restricted to a professional class of scribes. In a time and place where only a minority of the population could read or write, it is necessary to ask whether similarities among literary works are more likely due to literary or oral processes. This consideration is particularly pertinent in the early stages of Christianity when the accessibility of written works was limited. Much depends upon how we understand the way in which tradition was passed on. If, as Helmut Koester has argued, the most probable scenario is that people knew Jesus' sayings and other materials orally in the context of ritual, instruction, and missionary activity, then the burden of proof falls on those who want to argue that written works are the direct sources of the tradition.[32] As Koester himself notes, however, this conclusion is complicated by the possibility that material from written sources has entered into the mix, interacting with other oral and literary traditions. In that case, the distinction between written and oral sources is not cut and dried. An author may not be quoting from a written source, and yet materials from various written sources may have been inserted into the oral tradition upon which the author is dependent. This appears to be the case with the *Gospel of Mary*. It does not show a direct knowledge of any known written sources, yet neither is it completely independent of the Christian traditions that came to be formulated in the written gospels and the letters of Paul.

Finally, what level of proof is necessary, given that historical investigation never produces absolute certainty? Should one have to prove that the *Gospel of Mary* did not know these other works? Or that it did? Is it enough for scholars to show that it is *possible* for the *Gospel of Mary* to have known a specific work, or do they need to meet the heavier burden of showing that it is *probable*? These considerations are significant in a case like the present one because the conclusion will depend largely on the standards employed. While the lower standards clearly indicate the *possibility* that the *Gospel of Mary* knew the canonical gospels, such a conclusion cannot carry much weight. Since higher standards produce results that rest on a much firmer foundation, they will be used here. To conclude that the *Gospel of Mary* is independent of other known literary works would require proving that the cumulative weight of the evidence shows that it probably did not cite from these works.

A well-known example should help illustrate the significance of these considerations. Both the *Gospel of Matthew* and the *Gospel of Luke* contain a set of sayings usually called the beatitudes:

***Matt* 5:3–12**

Congratulations to the poor in spirit!
Heaven's domain belongs to them.
Congratulations to those who grieve:
They will be consoled.
Congratulations to the gentle!
They will inherit the earth.
Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for justice!
They will have a feast.
Congratulations to the merciful!
They will receive mercy.
Congratulations to those with undefiled hearts!
They will see God.
Congratulations to those who work for peace!
They will be known as God's children.
Congratulations to those who have suffered persecution for the sake of justice!
Heaven's domain belongs to them.
Congratulations to you when they denounce you and persecute you and spread malicious gossip about you because of me! Rejoice and be glad!
Your compensation is great in heaven.
Recall that this is how they persecuted the prophets who preceded you.

***Luke* 6:20–26**

Congratulations, you poor!
God's domain belongs to you.
Congratulations, you hungry!
You will have a feast.
Congratulations, you who weep now!
You will laugh.
Congratulations to you when people hate you, and when they ostracize you and denounce you and scorn your name as evil, because of the son of Adam! Rejoice on that day, and jump for joy! Just remember, your compensation is great in heaven. Recall that their ancestors treated the prophets the same way.
Damn you rich!
You already have your consolation.
Damn you who are well-fed now!
You will know hunger.
Damn you who laugh now! You will learn to weep and grieve.
Damn you when everybody speaks well of you! Recall that their ancestors treated the phony prophets the same way.

The word-for-word similarities in these two versions of the beatitudes is striking and seems to indicate a common source, whether written or oral. In some cases, minor differences in language, such as "the poor" versus "you poor," do not cause significant differences in meaning; "the poor" and "you poor" differ only in the rhetorical directness with which the audience is addressed, a feature called "performancial variation."[33] The same is not true of *Matthew*'s addition of "in spirit." To be poor "in spirit" is different from being poor, and

very different from *Luke*'s condemnation, "Damn you rich!" For source critics, the common elements of this saying are due to use of a common source; the differences are due to the work of the editors of the two gospels. The editor of *Matthew* has added "in spirit"; the editor of *Luke*, the condemnation of the rich.

By itself, this one beatitude is not sufficient to determine whether or not the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke* got this saying from the same literary source. It might just as easily have been filtered through different literary or oral sources. The weight of the evidence shifts when we look at the full sequence. Not only do the two gospels contain a number of very similar sayings, but the *order* in which the parallel materials appear is also similar.

Matthew	*Luke*
poor	poor
grieving	hungry
gentle	
hungry	weeping
merciful	
peacemakers	
persecuted	persecuted

It appears that the common source, *Q*, had only four beatitudes: poor, hungry, grieving, persecuted. The *Gospel of Matthew* appears to have added several additional beatitudes, and the order of grieving/hungry is reversed in the two works. Yet the similarity in order of their common material is striking enough to increase the *probability* that the two were based on a common literary source. This supposition is strengthened by consideration of the *Gospel of Thomas.* It, too, contains several beatitudes, but each appears alone, suggesting that the beatitudes circulated singly in the oral tradition. At some point they were strung together in a collection which was known to the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*, but not to *Thomas.*

In addition, both *Matthew* and *Luke* place the beatitudes in a longer sermon context: *Matthew* in the sermon on the mount (5-7), *Luke* in the sermon on the plain (6:17–49). That they would both keep the beatitudes as a collection within a sermon may be significant, even though each takes place in a different geographical location.

One hindrance for modern readers might be the lack of a citation formula. If both gospels took the beatitudes from *Q*, why didn't they say so? That fact is not particularly disturbing, however, since the use

of citation formulas in antiquity was quite rare. Unlike the modern world where references are required to avoid charges of plagiarism, the Roman world lacked a copyright office, and indeed most early Christian writing was anonymous or pseudonymous. Readers were likely to be offended only if language inappropriate to a person's known character was put on his or her lips.

All these factors indicate a strong possibility that the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke* used a common source for the beatitudes, and that they each adapted that source for their own purposes. The clinching argument, however, is that this pattern holds true not just for the beatitudes, but for the entirety of the two gospels. Again and again comparison shows patterns of similar language and order. As a result, scholars have come to the conclusion that the cumulative weight of the total evidence falls on the side of literary dependence: the similarities between the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke* are due to use of common sources, the *Gospel of Mark* and *Q*.

Comparison between the two gospels also demonstrates that differences can easily be accounted for as changes and additions made to reflect the editors' differing theological perspectives and interpretations of common material. This point is important for us because if a later author was quoting, say, *Matthew* and not *Luke*, the later work would be expected to show the secondary editorial features of *Matthew* not present in *Luke*. That is, a later work that reads "Congratulations to the poor!" could have a number of possible sources: oral tradition, *Q*, *Matthew*, or *Luke*. But if it reads "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*," the source is probably the *Gospel of Matthew*. It is not just *possible* that it is the *Gospel of Matthew*, it is *probable*.

If we now apply this method systematically to the *Gospel of Mary*, the results point decidedly toward its literary independence. It does not show a consistent pattern of similarity to any one source or set of sources known to us, whether in word for word citation, ordering of materials, context, or theological emphasis. I have arrived at this judgment for several reasons:

> The closest (often word-for-word) similarities appear only in material that either was very common in the first and second centuries (such as the greeting of peace, the command to follow, or the commission to preach the gospel), or that goes back to the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition (such as the saying about having ears to hear, the command to seek and

find, the characters, and the visionary appearances of Jesus to Mary of Magdala). This material could therefore have derived from any number of sources, oral or written, and no material clearly has to have been derived from any particular known work.

The order and arrangement of the individual pieces of tradition in the *Gospel of Mary* are significantly different from those of any known source.

The post-resurrection setting doesn't require an explanation of literary dependence; it could just as well be due to oral story-telling. The tradition that Jesus appeared to his disciples and gave them teaching after his resurrection is wide spread and, again, points to no specific source known to us.

While this point is rather moot, for the sake of completeness I should note that no citation formula appear in the *Gospel of Mary.*

Finally and most crucially, no specific evidence of secondary editorial labor from known sources appears in the sayings or narrative material.

Moreover the significant differences in the interpretation of common elements of the Jesus tradition do not suggest dependence, but rather point toward a context of independent theological development. I simply can't imagine that our author read the four canonical gospels and then sat down and wrote the *Gospel of Mary.* At the same time, it is clear that this stream of theological reflection was in conversation with other Christian views. Both the formulation of the Savior's teaching and the disputes among the disciples show a clear awareness of interpretations other than its own. The very literary setting of the work, as a revelation from the Savior to known apostles, seems fashioned to claim that its teaching comes directly from God and was conveyed with apostolic authority. These claims indicate a need to gain legitimacy for its views in a situation of competition with other Christians.

Let me summarize my conclusions.

1. Several sayings in the *Gospel of Mary* go back to the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition, and could have come from any number of sources, including oral tradition. These sayings are too

common to attribute to any particular source and show no specific redactional elements from any known literature.

- *ears to hear* (*GMary* 2:5, 3:14; *Mark* 4:9 and many other examples)
- *seek and find* (*GMary* 4:7; *Q* 11:9–10; *GThom* 38, 92, 94; *John* 7:34, 36; 13:33; *DSav* 126:6–11; 129:15).
- *mind (heart) and treasure* (*GMary* 7:4; *Q* 12:34; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.12,77; and many others)
- *look here, look there* (*GMary* 4:3–4; *Mark* 13:5–6 and par.; *Mark* 13:21–26 and par.; *GThom* 3; 113; *Luke* 17:20–21, 23–24)
- *kingdom/Son of Man is within* (*GMary* 4:5; *GThom* 3; 113; *Luke* 17:21)

2. Other sayings in the *Gospel of Mary* were crafted by the early churches, but were wide spread. No specific redactional elements from any known literature are apparent in the *Gospel of Mary.*
   - *peace* (*GMary* 4:1-2; *John* 14:27; 20:19, 21, 26; *Luke* 24:36[34]; *SoJsChr* NHC III 91:21–23; *PetPhil* 140:15–23)
   - *follow* (*GosMary* 4:6; *Mark* 8:34b and par.; *Q* 14:27)
   - *commission to preach* (*GMary* 4:8; 5:2; 10:12; *Matt* 24:14, *Mark* 13:10; *Luke* 21:13; *Mark* 16:15; *John* 20:21).
3. Narrative material that belongs to the life of the historical Jesus was widespread in the oral tradition:
   - Jesus teaching disciples
   - names of disciples and characterizations
   - death of Jesus (only mentioned but not narrated in *GMary* 5:3)
4. Narrative material that belongs to the later church that was also widespread in the early tradition:
   - post-resurrection visions and revelation, especially the report of an individual vision to Mary Magdalene
   - the disciples' reactions to Jesus' departure
   - the mission to preach the gospel

Those materials that belong to the early Jesus tradition and/or the life of the historical Jesus cannot be attributed to a known source without explicit reference to specific editorial materials (categories 1 and 3). Neither can those materials in the *Gospel of Mary* which show knowledge of traditions that were in all likelihood generated after the

death of Jesus be attributed to a specific source; rather they belonged to early tradition. Although word-for-word similarities between the *Gospel of Mary* and other early Christian writings are evident, these are best accounted for by source criticism in terms of independent transmission through unknown oral or literary works for three reasons. First, the order and arrangement of materials corresponds to no other known source. Second, the contexts for the sayings differ radically from known works in that they appear in the *Gospel of Mary* in a post-resurrection setting, not during the life of the historical Jesus. Third and most important, no specifically redactional material from any known work is evinced in the *Gospel of Mary.*

Furthermore, if we were to posit that *GMary* 4, for example, is composed of citations from known gospels, we would have to presume that the author of the *Gospel of Mary*

- took phrases or allusions from various written works, a bit here, a bit there (the peace saying from *John* or *Luke*; "lo, here; lo, there" from *Luke*, *Matthew*, *Q* or *Mark* (6:2–4); the [kingdom] is within you from *Luke* or *Thomas*; and the proclamation to preach the gospel from *Matthew* or *Mark*);
- ignored the narrative settings of all of the source texts;
- recombined the order in which the sayings are presented;
- added a new setting;
- substituted "son of man" for "kingdom";
- and gave the borrowed pieces a new meaning (the theology of the Human One within).

This process is far too cumbersome to be plausible as a description of how the *Gospel of Mary* was composed.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that the *Gospel of Mary* was among the earliest Christian works. Although its theology attests to the development of a distinctive interpretation of the Jesus tradition among some Gentile Christians, its formulation of the Savior's words and the controversy among the disciples after the Savior's departure offer substantial evidence that the author was aware of other early Christian interpretations of the Jesus tradition. The Savior warns against those who would expect a savior to rescue them—a common theme in apocalyptic works—and he exhorts the apostles not to lay down rules and laws beyond what he prescribed—such as excluding women from leadership in ministry. And it clearly defends Mary's

teaching and leadership against attacks by other prominent disciples, attacks that also resonate with intra-Christian controversy. To be sure, source criticism is useful in producing a negative answer; but in view of all these factors, an intertextual approach provides a far more satisfactory explanation of the *Gospel of Mary*.

Chapter 11

Paul

The *Gospel of Mary* shows notable similarities in terminology and conceptuality with the letters of Paul. Ann Pasquier, for example, has argued that there are close connections between *Romans* 7 and the *Gospel of Mary* 3-4.[1]

- *GMary* 3:3–8, 10–13: The Savior replied, "There is no such thing as sin; rather you yourselves are what produces sin when you act in accordance with the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin.' For this reason, the Good came among you, pursuing (the good) which belongs to every nature. It will set it within its root." Then he continued. He said, "This is why you get sick and die: because you love what deceives you. . . . Matter gave birth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. A disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body. That is why I told you, 'Become content at heart, while also remaining discontent and disobedient; indeed become contented and agreeably (only) in the presence of that other Image of nature.'"
- *GMary* 4:9–10: "Do not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it."

- *Rom* 7:1-8; 22-23: "Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during one's life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man when her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. ... For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

Pasquier lists the following points of agreement between these passages:

- Domination under the law is compared to adultery.
- Adultery is compared with enslavement to passion and it leads to death.
- Freedom from the law means overcoming the domination of death.
- Sin does not really exist.
- Law, sin, and death are interconnected.
- An opposition is made between the divine law/nature which gives life and that fleshly law/nature which imprisons or dominates one.

According to Pasquier, the *Gospel of Mary* has transformed Paul's attempt to understand the value of Jewish law in the face of the saving event of Christ's death and resurrection by placing his discussion of law within a cosmological setting. This displacement significantly changes the meaning of Paul's message. Whereas Paul contends that Christ came to free humanity from sin, the teaching of the Savior in the *Gospel of Mary* warns against adulterous attachment to the material world and the body. In contrast to Paul, it sees law not as divine and purposeful (*Rom* 7:7, 12–14), but as a tool of domination.

Yet it is not at all clear that the author of the *Gospel of Mary* was purposefully and consciously taking this passage from Paul in order to transform its message. There is no direct citation, and the language and themes of passion, sin, adultery, law, and death can be found in a wide variety of literature—though to be sure not always grouped together in such close conjunction. Since Paul's letters were being circulated fairly widely by the second century, it is possible that the similarities may have led some readers (in antiquity as well as in the twentieth century) to connect the two literary works. But if so, the important issue is not whether *Gospel of Mary* was influenced by Paul, but how reading the two works together would mutually affect their meanings and theological impact.

In *Rom* 7–8, Paul is writing to fellow Christians in Rome about how Gentiles can receive salvation from God through faith in Christ. His argument centers around the question of how Gentiles can overcome the carnal desires and passions to which they are enslaved in the face of their refusal to acknowledge the true God.[2] Paul argues that they cannot overcome these sinful passions through the law, for only through faith in Christ's death and resurrection (or through Christ's faithfulness[3]) will they be able to serve God in the new life of the Spirit.[4] The reference to adultery serves to illustrate the legal status of Gentiles before God. Paul likens the situation of Gentiles who are dominated by sinful passions to that of an adulterous woman: just as freedom from the law of sin is made possible by the death of Christ, so the death of a woman's husband frees her to become a "good wife." During life, faith frees the body from the wicked passions which dominate it, so that at death the gross physical body can be transformed into an immortal spiritual body (*1 Cor* 15:35–57).

In *GMary* 3, the themes of sin, adultery, and death are raised by Jesus in response to Peter's question "What is the sin of the world?"

Paul's concern for the admission of the Gentiles into the community of Israel is not at issue. Instead, the problem is how to understand and overcome human enslavement to passion in view of the material nature of the body and the world, for since the material world is finite and temporary, it cannot be the basis for an ethics that has ultimate and enduring spiritual value. For the *Gospel of Mary*, therefore, sin is not a matter of right and wrong acts; rather it has to do with the improper mixing (adultery) of material and spiritual natures, which in turn leads to the improper domination of the spiritual nature by the material. Salvation is achieved by overcoming attachment to the body and the material world, for it is this attachment which keeps people enslaved to suffering and death. Ultimately, it is attachment to the body that produces sin. From this perspective, sin doesn't really exist, because the material world and the body associated with it are merely temporary phenomena, soon to pass away. The Goodness of God is what will endure, and it transcends mortal distinctions between good and evil.

Both Paul and the *Gospel of Mary* have been misunderstood. Already in the period of the early church, the author of the *Letter of James* strove to ensure that Paul's insistence on faith as the sole route to salvation[5] not be taken to mean that the ethical life is not important: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a person says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (*Jas* 2:14, 17). So, too, the Savior's statement in the *Gospel of Mary* that there is no such thing as sin could easily be read to mean that moral behavior is not important for salvation[6], that people need only look to their own salvation and can ignore their responsibilities toward others. But this reading is as incorrect as the view that Paul did not believe the moral life was important.

Both Paul and the *Gospel of Mary* insist that the proper relationship to God requires strong ethical sensibilities and practice.[7] In the *Gospel of Mary*, these are particularly modeled by Mary of Magdala. Having attained inward peace and stability, she does not fear the possibility of persecution. Nor is she merely concerned with her own salvation, for in comforting and instructing the other disciples she supports them with her words and behavior. Far from even hinting that she is given to licentiousness, arrogance, or self-indulgence, the gospel exhibits the contrary. Peter, on the other hand, models what the spiritually undeveloped person is like: fearful, arrogant, jealous,

ignorant. Moreover, the Savior's injunction against establishing any law is obviously intended not to invite licentiousness, but to ensure that moral behavior and ethical judgments derive from spiritual goodness rather than conformity to external constraints. Paul and the *Gospel of Mary* both assume that cultivating the spiritual life will enhance the moral life, and vice versa.

The views of Paul and the *Gospel of Mary* quite naturally appear to be similar: they are dealing with a similar problem (how to overcome sin and death); they have a similar diagnosis of the problem (that desires and passions, signaled by enslavement to the body, lead to death); and they have a similar solution to the problem (the life of the spirit). But in the end they differ irreconcilably because their views of sin and salvation are focused on different concerns and belong to different contexts. For Paul, the main issue is the relation of Gentiles to the Jewish law in the face of Christ's saving death and resurrection; for the *Gospel of Mary*, the problem is understanding the Savior's teaching about the nature of sin itself and the means of overcoming suffering and death. Paul's framing of the issue places him firmly within the thought-world of Judaism, while the *Gospel of Mary* reflects concerns that make sense in a Gentile context in which the intellectual arena is dominated by philosophical debates about the relation of material nature to ethics.

It is highly likely that the *actual behaviors* of those who followed these two views appeared very similar, but the two groups would have understood the *meaning* of their behaviors quite differently. Insofar as people accept the teaching of works like the *Gospel of Mary* or the letters of Paul, their moral reflection is directed by the vision of life and value referents conveyed in the work.[8] Those visions structure particular frameworks within which questions about human relationships, moral choices, loyalties, and religious ideas have meaning and can be answered. Such works offer not only portraits of how things really are, but also views of what ought to be. They don't necessarily answer all the questions, but they provide contexts of meaning within which ethical reflection occurs, within which beliefs, values, and behaviors can be assessed and integrated, and toward which behaviors can be aligned. "The basic vision of reality within which one thinks and experiences is crucial for how ethical issues arise and are dealt with."[9] Therefore the stories we tell, the literature we hold dear, even the films and TV we watch are all crucial to the education of our moral

imagination and moral feeling. If they are shallow and authoritarian, so will be our capacity for moral behavior. It matters greatly what kind of stories we live with.

The work of Paul and the *Gospel of Mary* provide very different orientations for thinking about what it means to be a human being. For Paul, the self is a physical, psychic, and spiritual whole. The body is thus fully self, even as the soul is. Paul believed that people without faith perish at death—soul and body. There is no hint of the idea of an immortal life of punishment for unbelievers. When they die, they stay dead. Believers, on the other hand, rise to immortal life with God. The gross physical body is transformed into a spiritual body, immortal and freed from all its mortal passions and suffering. For Paul moral behavior is essential in purifying the body in order for it to be the spiritual dwelling place of God, not in overcoming the attachment of the soul to the body as in the *Gospel of Mary*. As was said above, for the *Gospel of Mary*, the body is not one's real self. Only the soul infused with the spirit carries the truth of what it really means to be a human being. As a result, ethical concern is focused not on catering to the desires of the body, but upon strengthening the spiritual self, for at death the liberated soul is released from the body and ascends to rest with God beyond time and eternity, while the corpse returns to the inanimate material nature out of which it came.

Such views about death and immortality had an impact on how early Christians interpreted persecution and suffering. The case of martyrdom offers an instructive example. In her path-breaking work, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels pointed out that whether one thinks the body will be saved or not has consequences for attitudes toward martyrdom.[10] The *Gospel of Mary* confronts the issue directly. When the Savior departs, all the disciples except Mary are frightened about what might happen if they go out to preach the gospel. They fear that if the Romans did not spare Jesus, they wouldn't spare them either. They have clearly not understood Jesus' teaching that salvation comes by turning away from the world to God, so that at death the soul is prepared to ascend to its eternal rest. It is, however, not as easy to dismiss the disciples' fear as it is to disregard their lack of understanding. The possibility of persecution must have been very real for the Christians who wrote and read the *Gospel of Mary*. The missionary fervor of the early movement could put men and women in real danger.[11] It is no coincidence that the disciples' fear follows immediately

upon the Savior's commission to go forth and preach the gospel. This activity would have exposed them to real risk.

Yet fear of death was universally regarded among early Christians as a failing. The martyr stories invariably portray the hero or heroine as fearless and full of faith. The reality was more ambiguous. Personal accounts written by Christian martyrs before their deaths show that dealing with fear was a substantial preoccupation. Two such accounts have survived. One is the witness of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Asia Minor, who was arrested and taken to Rome for execution sometime during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (98–117 CE). On the way, he wrote letters to several churches and these epistles have been preserved. The other is that of Perpetua, a young mother with a nursing infant, who was put to death in North Africa at the beginning of the third century. She kept a diary during her time in prison, and portions of it were later incorporated into an account of her death called *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*. Knowing they were to be executed, both wrote of the need to overcome their fears in order to be true witnesses of the gospel. They feared not only for themselves but for the fate of those around them. Ignatius was disturbed at the rift within his church in Antioch; Perpetua feared for her infant and for the fate of her younger brother who had died of what appears to be some sort of facial cancer. In the last of his letters, Ignatius gives thanks that unity and peace are restored to his church; Perpetua is able to hand her child over to the care of her parents, and she receives a divine vision confirming that her brother is happy. Only with these situations resolved were Ignatius and Perpetua able to prepare to face the realities of their own deaths. In their accounts, they imagine what it will be like to be torn apart by beasts or face the gladiator's sword. Each manages to find courage in the hope of eternal life, and both believed that martyrdom was the surest way to gain that priceless reward. Ignatius expected that his suffering and imminent death would make him "like Christ," while Perpetua had a vision in which she received the victor's crown of immortality.

Whatever we might think of their willingness to die—whether it was fanaticism or heroism—it is clear that their belief in the reality of eternal life provided courage and a basis for hope. We can surmise that the same could be true for those who followed the teachings of the Savior in the *Gospel of Mary*. Knowing that the mortal body is not the true self should have provided the strength to face persecution; after

all, the body would die and dissolve back to its elemental nature no matter what they did, and the Romans could not damage their true spiritual selves or hinder their eternal salvation.

Some Christians claimed that heretics who disbelieved in the physical resurrection also avoided martyrdom. New discoveries have provided examples, however, of theologies that could deny the physical resurrection and still insist that martyrdom was necessary. The *Letter of Peter to Philip* provides one example. In this work, the Lord Jesus Christ takes on a body of flesh and is crucified, but Peter tells the other disciples, "Jesus is a stranger to this suffering" (*PetPhil* 139:21–22). How can this be true? In an appearance to his disciples after the resurrection, the Lord tells them that they have not truly understood his teaching unless they accept the fact that they, too, must suffer even as he had suffered. Suffering is inevitable because preaching the gospel will expose them to the retribution of the powers that rule the world. He tells them:

> "When you strip off from yourselves what is corrupted, then you will become illuminators in the midst of mortal men. You will fight against the powers, because they do not have rest like you, since they do not wish that you be saved. . . . Now you will fight against them in this way, for the rulers are fighting against the inner Human. And you are to fight against them in this way: Come together and teach in the world the salvation with a promise. And you, gird yourselves with the power of my Father, and let your prayer be known. And the Father will help you as he has helped you by sending me. Be not afraid, I am with you forever as I previously said to you when I was in the body." Then there came lightning and thunder from heaven, and what appeared to them in that place was taken up to heaven (*PetPhil* 137:6–13; 137:20–138:4).[12]

Jesus is exempt from suffering—and so are the apostles—not because they will not endure persecution but because pain and death concern only the mortal body, not the true inner self. "Be not afraid," he tells them.

Even after the persecutions ended with the conversion of Constantine early in the fourth century, Christian doctrine would teach that suffering is valuable in itself to overcome human pride and

to shape the sinner into an obedient servant of God. In sharp contrast, the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Letter of Peter to Philip* do not ascribe any redemptive value to suffering. It is preaching the gospel that gives life; persecution is only an unfortunate, if inevitable, result of that activity because there are powers that oppose the gospel in the world. Believing the truth of the gospel leads people away from suffering by teaching them to overcome the passions and defeat the powers by putting on the perfect Human.

In this context we might also briefly consider Peter's question, "What is the sin of the world?" Here readers might well think not of Paul, but of the *Gospel of John* where John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him and exclaims: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (*John* 1:29). If the author of the *Gospel of Mary* intends this intertextual reference, it must be yet another attempt to counter a Christology that was deemed unacceptable. The Savior did not teach that his death, like a lamb led to sacrificial slaughter, atoned for the sins of others; since sin does not exist, atonement is unnecessary. Or rather because sin is attachment to the world, turning from the love of the world to the love of God removes humanity from the power of sin.

The end result is that the *Gospel of Mary* does not teach that people need to suffer in order to gain salvation, nor do people deserve to suffer because they sin. This theology rejects any view of God as a wrathful judge who punishes the wicked for their sins with eternal suffering or who demands that his child atone for the sins of humanity through a horrible death. The *Gospel of Mary* explicitly avoids all description of God except as Good. The Savior's teachings are aimed at freeing people from suffering and death, not punishing them for their sins. The *Gospel of Mary* has no notion of hell. There is no intrinsic value in the atoning death of Christ or the martyrdom of believers or the punishment of souls because there is no such thing as sin. This theology stands in clear contrast to that of other Christians, however much their language and themes resonate with each other.

Chapter 12

The Gospel of John

Some possible intertextual relations between the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of John* deserve our special attention because of the role that each gives to Mary of Magdala. In his farewell discourse in the *Gospel of John*, Jesus comforts the disciples: "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (*John* 14:27; cf. *John* 14:1). He tells them that they are to bear witness to the truth, even though they will be persecuted for doing so (*John* 15:18–21; 16:1–3). He prays to the Father that "they may all be one" and asks that they be kept safe from the "evil one." He prays, too, for his own glorification. In the *Gospel of Mary*, after the Savior commissions the disciples to preach the gospel, the disciples are afraid but Mary steps in to comfort them: "Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared/united us and made us Human beings" (*GMary* 5:5–8). In both these scenes, the disciples are comforted with similar words and for a similar reason: the Savior is departing and his followers will face persecution. Both works affirm that the Savior has prepared them and unified them so that they are ready to face what he commanded them to do. And even as the Father glorifies the Son, so Mary calls upon the disciples to praise the Savior's

greatness. For readers who connect these two passages, the striking point is that here Mary plays the role of comforter which in the *Gospel of John* is ascribed to Jesus. She has stepped in and taken over the task of comforting the disciples and reminding them that the Savior has prepared them and will shelter them.

In a later scene, the *Gospel of John* shows Mary weeping after the crucifixion, distressed at the Savior's death because she does not know where he is. He appears to her and sends her to tell the good news to the other disciples: "'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her" (*John* 20:18). The disciples then receive appearances of the Lord that confirm Mary's message. In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary also weeps—but at Peter's accusation and at the threat that rivalry may disrupt the unity of the apostolic group, not at the Savior's departure. She had just told them "I saw the Lord in a vision" (*GMary* 7:1) and recounted the words that the Savior had spoken to her. Again the most striking similarity is the narrative context: Both gospels affirm that Mary saw the Lord and gave special revelation to the other disciples, but in the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary's teaching sparks controversy rather than faith. Although Peter had asked her to tell them the Savior's words, he now challenges her veracity and she weeps in response. The *Gospel of John* does not record the response of the disciples to Mary's message, but readers may recall the *Gospel of Luke* at this point: "Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (*Luke* 24:10–11). *Luke* does not tell us how the women reacted to the disbelief of their fellow disciples, but we may well imagine that they wept. In *Luke*, too, the women's message provokes only doubt and perhaps grief.

The sequence of events in the *Gospel of John* also differs from the *Gospel of Mary* in when the commission to preach occurs. In the *Gospel of John*, Jesus comforts the disciples before the crucifixion; he appears to Mary after the resurrection and she brings the good news to the disciples. Yet in the next scene, we are told that the disciples had locked themselves in a room "for fear of the Jews," implying that they feared that they might be accused even as Jesus had been (*John* 20:19). Now Jesus appears in their midst, saying "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (*John* 20:21). In this portrayal, the disciples remain frightened even after Mary had brought them the good news; nor are we told how they reacted to Jesus' commission.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, no specious blame is attached to the Jews. The disciples' fear follows the Savior's commissioning to go out and preach, but it precedes Mary's message about her vision of the Savior. The effect, as I noted before, is to make it clear that not all the disciples have understood the Savior's teaching and not all are prepared to preach the gospel. Mary alone is presented as ready and able to step into the Savior's role.

It would seem that the *Gospel of John* affirms Mary's role as teacher to the other disciples, much as the *Gospel of Mary* does. But their portrayals exhibit significant differences. The *Gospel of John* states that the first appearance of the resurrected Lord was to Mary, and that she was the first to use the confessional title "Lord" to refer to him (*John* 20:18), even as in the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary calls the Savior "Lord." On the other hand, Mary's status is diminished in the *Gospel of John* in that she at first mistakes him for the gardener, and then when she does recognize his voice, she addresses him as "Teacher" (Rabboni), indicating a relatively low standing on the hierarchical scale of Johannine Christological titles. The exegetical sore point, however, is in Jesus' command that she not hold him because he has not yet ascended. Usually scholars interpret this command as indicating that Mary tried to cling to him, not recognizing that his ascent was necessary for sending the Spirit and salvation. The whole scene in the *Gospel of John* works to subordinate Mary's authority as a resurrection witness to that of the male disciples, especially by limiting her commission to bear witness only to the other disciples.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, on the other hand, Mary immediately recognizes the Lord when he appeared and he praises her for her steadfastness of mind. As we've already noted, she takes over many of his roles after his departure and is consistently portrayed as a model disciple and apostle. Still, Mary's weeping is not the strong response to Peter's accusations we might wish for, and it is Levi not Mary who gets the last word in the gospel. Jane Schaberg suggests that by ending with Levi's speech, the author allows male voices to overshadow Mary; silenced, she disappears from the story.[1] But surely her response to Peter does not seriously weaken the overwhelmingly positive portrait of her. Sheila McKeithen contends that Mary's weeping demonstrates her distress at both the disciples' lack of comprehension and their fomenting of discord among the apostles.[2] Her weeping is not a sign of weakness, but compassion. And in the end Levi's speech offers a decisive defense of Mary. She may not get the last word, but she is

entirely vindicated. Even Schaberg notes that of all the gospel literature about Mary of Magdala, the *Gospel of Mary* is the only text where Mary actually gets to speak in her own defense.

Nonetheless it seems odd that the author of the *Gospel of Mary* would put Mary's teaching in doubt at all, given that she provides the primary apostolic authority for the gospel. But then it is also odd that the *Gospel of John* diminishes Mary's role as a witness to the resurrection by saying that she initially mistook him for the gardener and was then forbidden to touch him. If the resurrection appearances in *John* are supposed to affirm the physical character of the resurrection, this statement is alarming, for it can all too easily be read as a sign that Mary was confused or that the risen Lord was not palpable.[3] These surprising oddities should lead us to suspect that something else must be going on.

In her study of the *Gospel of John*, April De Conick has pointed to an intertext from Homer's *Odyssey*, the scene in which Odysseus' nurse recognizes him, even though he is disguised, because of a distinctive scar on his foot (*Od.* 19.357–60). Similarly, when the murdered Clytemnestra appears in a play by Euripedes, she expects to be recognized by the wounds that killed her; and Aeneas, the hero of Vergil's *Aeneid*, recognized several of the dead by their death wounds.[4] So, too, De Conick argues, the post-resurrection scenes in *John* 20 involving Mary and Thomas were intended not to prove the physical resurrection of Jesus but to establish his identity. Although Mary recognized him by his voice, not by his wounds as Thomas did, the analogy stands.

We may not recognize these intertexts as quickly as did ancient readers who were raised on the Homeric stories, but the recognition scene is a widespread topos in ancient literature.[5] In the *Gospel of John*, the clinching point is made by the risen Lord himself, who says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (*John* 20:29). As the German theologian Rudolph Bultmann noted, the real Easter faith "is not faith in a palpable demonstration of the Risen Lord within the mundane sphere"; the authority to preach the gospel had already been given to the whole community by the bestowal of the Spirit.[6] Thus, just as the Johannine recognition scenes with Mary and Thomas obviate the necessity of touching and seeing as a basis for faith, so the *Gospel of Mary* can be seen to use the attacks of Andrew and Peter to forestall objections by other Christians against its teaching. Its point is not to argue for a spiritual resurrection, but to insist

that eternal life requires the transformation of the inner Human. Those who expect a savior to come on the clouds of heaven to save them have simply missed the point of the Savior's teaching. Like the *Gospel of John*, it affirms that the apostles saw and heard the risen Savior, but those experiences are not in themselves necessary for salvation.

It is not clear whether the author of the *Gospel of Mary* would have expected readers to connect the appearance accounts in the *Gospel of John* and the *Gospel of Mary*, but for any who did (and later readers surely would have) the association would at once affirm the tradition that the Lord appeared to Mary of Magdala after his resurrection and imparted special revelation to her that allowed her to instruct the other apostles; and it would also work to "correct" any imputation in the *Gospel of John* that Mary was less than entirely worthy of her commission as "apostle to the apostles."

Chapter 13

The Apostles

Four apostles appear by name in the *Gospel of Mary*: Levi, Andrew, Peter, and Mary. The very mention of their names conjures up kaleidoscopic images from two thousand years of gospels, acts, sermons, and saints lives, as well as images from painting, sculpture, novels, and cinema. The apostles are the foremost heroes of Christianity, and stories about them have proliferated for centuries, overwhelming their historical deeds with legend, myth, and ritual. Their relics adorn major sites of Christian pilgrimage; their names identify countless churches and cathedrals. Patriarchs and emperors have fought to associate apostolic authority with their own spiritual and temporal power.

Their prestige and popularity, however, obscure the fact that we actually have very little reliable historical information about these first followers of Jesus. Part of the reason for that lies with the nature of the ancient evidence. The modern concept of the person did not exist in antiquity; the apostles are represented in ancient literature not as unique individuals with distinctive psychological profiles and particular biographies, but as types. So, too, in the *Gospel of Mary*: Mary is the ideal of the beloved disciple and the model apostle; Peter is the hot-head and Andrew his side-kick; Levi is a mediator and peacemaker. In the hands of the gospel authors, the disciples were malleable

characters who served the writers' own goals and reflected their perspectives. In the *Gospel of Mark*, for example, the disciples are commonly portrayed as misunderstanding Jesus; their incomprehension frequently serves the narrative purpose of giving Jesus the opportunity to clarify his points, correct their mistaken views, or provide secret teaching. In other works, like the *Gospel of Luke*, the apostles figure as faithful witnesses who can attest to Jesus' teachings and deeds. And upon reading that Paul accused Peter of being a hypocrite for ceasing to eat with Gentiles when members of the "circumcision party" arrived in Antioch (*Gal* 2:11–13), we have to ask ourselves whose perspective is being represented. Did it happen the way Paul says? What might Peter have said in response to Paul's accusation? So also in the *Gospel of Mary*, the apostles serve the writer's goals as well. In order to understand those goals, we need to know more about how these literary characters were represented.

Still, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that these four apostles were historical people as well as literary figures. They were early followers of Jesus who accompanied him on his travels through Galilee and up to Jerusalem. All were Jews, even if little trace of that identity remains in the *Gospel of Mary*. Certain specific historical information attaches to each of them. Levi had been a tax collector. Andrew and Peter were brothers, whose trade was fishing. Mary came from Magdala and was the first to have a vision of the Lord. Peter, too, saw the risen Christ and was a leader in the early mission. These were ordinary people who made extraordinary choices to leave their mundane lives and embark on a dangerous mission to spread the gospel. This much at least is known to us in the twentieth century. What might second-century readers of the *Gospel of Mary* have known about these figures or associated with their names?

Levi

Both the gospels of *Mark* and *Luke* describe Levi as a tax collector who became a disciple of Jesus (*Mark* 2:14; *Luke* 5:27–29), but neither include him in their list of the twelve. The *Gospel of Matthew* also tells a story about a tax collector (*Matt* 9:9), but his name is Matthew; this Matthew, however, is included in the list of "the twelve" (*Matt* 10:3). This confusion led later tradition sometimes to identify the two, but it is not clear that Levi was widely regarded as one of "the twelve" in the early tradition. He is not mentioned in

the *Gospel of John* at all. A certain Levi appears in the second-century *Gospel of Philip*, but he is identified only as the owner of a dye works and probably has no connection with our Levi the tax collector (*GPhil* 63:26). Levi also appears in the *First Apocalypse of James* 37:7, but the text is so fragmentary that it is impossible to say much about the role he plays there.

His striking appearance as Mary's defender in the *Gospel of Mary* is therefore a bit of a surprise. Was he chosen for this role because, like Mary, he did not belong to "the twelve," even though he was an early disciple of Jesus? It is hard to say. But he does appear second only to Mary as one who understood the teaching of the Savior. He takes Peter to task and defends Mary's character, calling the apostles to return to the commands of the Savior and go forth to preach. In the Greek fragment, he alone leaves to spread the gospel. Given his relative obscurity in other literature, this highly prominent role is remarkable, if enigmatic. Perhaps other stories associated with Levi are lost to us. We can only wonder.

Andrew

Andrew's primary claim to fame is that he was the brother of Peter, and in the earliest literature he appears almost solely in that connection. In the *Gospel of Mark*, he and Peter are portrayed as fishers from Capernaum, the first of the disciples called by the Lord (*Mark* 1:16–18), and Andrew appears regularly in the gospel lists of disciples (e.g., *Mark* 3:18; *Matt* 10:2; *Luke* 6:14; *Acts* 1:13). In the *Gospel of John*, he appears initially as a follower of John the Baptist, but becomes the first disciple called by Jesus and leads his brother Peter to the Lord as well (*John* 1:35–42). He is the only apostle mentioned by name in the extant portion of the newly discovered *Gospel of the Savior*, but unfortunately his words are lost in a lacuna (*GSav* 97:31–32).[1] His only other appearance in the early literature is in the *Gospel of Mary*, where again he appears in close conjunction with Peter and is quickly overshadowed by his brother's presence. Andrew's complaint against Mary receives no direct response either from her or from Levi, both of whom address only Peter. Andrew does not appear again in Christian literature until the end of the second century, when he becomes the hero of the *Acts of Andrew*, a mammoth work that portrays him as a miracle-working missionary sent to Achaea, northern Anatolia, Thrace, and Macedonia. There he is active in breaking up

marriages by preaching celibacy and is crucified by an angry husband on the shore of the sea. Eventually Andrew takes a firm place in Christian legend as the apostolic guarantor of the bishop's see of Byzantium, where his role of bringing Peter to the faith becomes a most useful tool in the polemics between Byzantium and Rome over ecclesiastical supremacy.[2] All of this, however, occurs long after the *Gospel of Mary* was written and there is no hint that the author would expect readers to associate anything with Andrew except his filial tie to Peter.

Peter

Historically Peter,[3] also called Simon and Cephas (*Mark* 3:16; *Matt* 10:2; 16:17–19),[4] was a fisherman from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (*Mark* 1:16–18). He accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry and was a prominent member of the inner circle of his followers. He was married, and apparently his wife traveled with him on missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor (*Mark* 1:29–31; *1 Cor* 15:5). Later tradition reports that he was martyred and buried in Rome, but this has been disputed—usually along Catholic-Protestant lines.

Peter plays a prominent role in early Christian literature, and Levi's remark implying that Peter's temper and impetuosity are well-known indicates quite clearly that readers would be expected to know something of the tradition about him. Peter's role in the *Gospel of Mary* has struck some scholars as revisionary,[5] for here Peter does not appear as the illustrious rock upon which Jesus founded the church, but as an ignorant hothead who sowed discord among the disciples. This portrait, however, has a strong basis in early Christian tradition, a tradition which painted Peter as a complex and rather ambiguous character. The *Gospel of Mark*, for example, recounts a scene where Jesus himself called Peter "Satan" (*Mark* 8:31–33): Jesus had just predicted his death and suffering, and Peter had the temerity to tell Jesus he was wrong! Once Jesus had to save Peter from drowning because his faith was too weak to walk on water (*Matt* 14:29–31). At the transfiguration, his fear leads him to offer to build three booths, one each for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (*Mark* 9:5–6). Still later, Peter insisted that even if everyone else abandoned Jesus, he never would—and this just before he denies him not once, but three times (*Mark* 14:29–31; 66–72), a story recounted not only in *Mark*, but repeated in the other

canonical gospels as well. In another scene in the *Gospel of John*, Peter at first refuses to have Jesus wash his feet; but when Jesus says that otherwise Peter will have no part in him, Peter goes overboard in the other direction and demands Jesus wash his hands and head as well (*John* 13:6-11). In Gethsemane, when the disciples fall asleep while Jesus prays, Jesus' disappointment is directed primarily at Peter: "Simon are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (*Mark* 14:37–38). At the arrest, Peter pulls out a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave Malchus, earning another rebuke from Jesus (*John* 18:10–11). As noted earlier, even Paul had troubles with Peter, and accused him of acting like a hypocrite by changing his behavior to suit his audience (*Gal* 2:11–13).[6] These repeated examples in the early literature consistently portray Peter as a bold fellow, but also as someone who doesn't quite understand what is going on. The *Gospel of the Nazarenes* took a very harsh position on Peter's character and pronounced the final judgment that Peter "denied and swore and damned himself" (*GNaz* 19).

While wide-spread, this characterization of Peter is not the only one. Paul places Peter first in his list of those who saw the risen Christ (*1 Cor* 15:5) and the *Gospel of Luke* attests that he had an individual resurrection appearance (*Luke* 24:34).[7] Paul accepts Peter as a leader in the Jerusalem church and a reliable source of tradition about Jesus (*Gal* 1:18; 2:1–10). He also accedes to Peter the role of "apostle to the circumcised" (*Gal* 2:8), despite the fact that Peter appears hypocritical in his behavior toward Gentiles. The *Acts of the Apostles* broadens Peter's role, making him also the first to receive a vision attesting to the mission to the Gentiles (*Acts* 10). The *Gospel of Mark* paints a rather ambivalent picture of Peter, depicting him both as an intimate member of Jesus' inner circle and as an unreliable blusterer. *Matthew*'s portrait is even more ambiguous, continuing the tradition of Peter as the one who denied Jesus but also offering a unique scene in which Jesus designates Peter as the rock upon which he will found the church, and hands him the keys of the kingdom and the power to bind and loose (*Matt* 16:18–19). The most positive portrait by far, however, is that found in the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. In his gospel, the author goes to considerable lengths to undermine the tradition of Peter as a continual failure, bolstering his image in preparation for his role as the leading spokesman of the apostles, a powerful miracle-worker, and bold evangelist in the book of *Acts* (1–5,

8–11).[8] The *Gospel of John*, in contrast, minimizes Peter's role in the first twenty chapters, but this changes rather dramatically in chapter 21, where Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him; Peter answers yes, and Jesus tells him to "Feed my sheep" (*John* 21:15–17). The triple repetition in this dialogue is often understood as a parallel to Peter's triple denial, intended to rehabilitate his status with the Lord and prepare him for his martyrdom (*John* 21:18–19). But there are also telling details that invite comparison of *Luke*'s treatment of Peter with the treatment of Mary in the *Gospel of Mary*. Once Jesus asks Peter if he loves him "more than these," meaning the other disciples, and in the end Peter responds, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you" (*John* 21:15, 17). Here Peter's special love is confirmed by the Savior's knowledge of him, even as in *GMary* 10:10 Jesus' love of Mary is confirmed by his knowledge of her. Would readers of the *Gospel of Mary* have seen the similarities here, or was the trope linking love and knowledge too widespread for a specific association of the two passages? Is the *Gospel of John* trying to replace Mary with Peter? or is the *Gospel of Mary* undermining Peter's role? Readers who knew both texts would have to wonder.

Numerous early Christian works are ascribed to Peter, including the canonical letters of *1* and *2 Peter*, the *Gospel of Peter*,[9] the *Letter of Peter to Philip*,[10] the *Apocalypse of Peter*,[11] the *Kerygma Petri*,[12] and the *Acts of Peter*.[13] But while this literature consistently takes Peter as a guarantor of apostolic authority and paints him in positive terms, he remains theologically elusive, in part because he is used to authorize conflicting theological positions. For example, *2 Peter*, an early second-century letter, claims Peter's explicit support of apostolic authority by calling upon the readers to remember "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" (*2 Pet* 3:1–2). It also invokes Peter's authority against certain interpretations of Paul that the unknown author of the letter opposed (see *2 Pet* 3:14–17). While Irenaeus uses Peter as a witness to the physical reality of Jesus' incarnation,[14] the *Apocalypse of Peter* has him receive a revelation from the Savior that rejects the incarnation and affirms that Jesus only *seemed* to have a body. In the *Gospel of Peter*, which was ascribed to him, Peter appears only once in the extant fragment, but in a crucial role. After Mary of Magdala and other unnamed women meet the angel at the tomb and flee in fear, Peter along with Andrew and Levi go out fishing. The manuscript cuts off here and what happens is lost, but it is highly likely that what followed was an account of the first

resurrection appearance of Jesus. Also, other than the *Gospel of Mary*, this is the only gospel that associates Peter and Andrew with Levi—all as witnesses to the resurrection—and Mary of Magdala is the only other disciple to appear by name. This grouping may provide a key to Levi's prominent role in the *Gospel of Mary*: there may have been a widespread tradition that these four had special post-resurrection experiences.

After the second century, Peter continued to have a long and illustrious afterlife in legend, art, and ecclesiastical politics as the preeminent apostle of Christian faith, the co-founder of the Roman church, and the apostolic guarantor for papal authority.[15] In the *Gospel of Mary*, however, none of this is apparent. Peter appears solely in his role as ignorant hothead. His challenge to Mary presents him as a jealous man who cannot see past the weakness of the flesh to discern spiritual truth.

Mary of Magdala

The earliest Christian literature, including the gospels that came to reside in the New Testament, portrays Mary of Magdala as a prominent Jewish disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.[16] Her epithet "Magdalene" probably indicates that she came from the town of Magdala (Migdal), located on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret), just north of the city of Tiberias.[17] Along with many other women, she accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry.[18] She was present at his crucifixion[19] and burial,[20] and was a witness to the empty tomb.[21] Among the earliest surviving Christian art is a portrait of Mary Magdalene with other women bringing spices to anoint Jesus at the tomb.[22] Early Christian gospel traditions generally accord Mary of Magdala a prominent position among the followers of Jesus, especially among the women followers, as is attested by the frequent practice of placing Mary's name first in the lists of women who followed Jesus.[23] She is one of the main speakers in several first and second-century texts recording dialogues of Jesus with his disciples after the resurrection.[24] Indeed, she is portrayed as the first or among the first privileged to see and speak with the risen Lord.[25] In the *Gospel of John*, the risen Jesus gives her special teaching and commissions her to announce the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples. She obeys, and is thus the first to proclaim the resurrection.[26] Although she is never specifically called an apostle, she fills the role and later tradition

will herald her as "the apostle to the apostles."[27] The strength of this literary tradition, attested as it is in multiple independent witnesses, makes it possible to suggest that historically Mary may have been a prophetic visionary and leader within some sector of the early Christian movement after the death of Jesus.[28] This much may be said of Mary of Magdala with a high degree of historical probability.

The *Gospel of Luke* does provide two additional details, but both have been questioned by scholars. *Luke* 8:2 identifies Mary as the one "from whom seven demons had gone out," but it is the only independent source to do so.[29] Although it does not explicitly say that Jesus himself cast out the demons, he was well known as an exorcist—however moderns may understand that practice—and it is probable that *Luke* intends readers to think that he healed Mary.[30] In addition, *Luke* 8:3 mentions that Mary Magdalene was of independent means and supported Jesus out of her own resources, as did other Galilean women like Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. But this piece of information also is found only in *Luke*, and it may very well have been retrojected back into the early period from a later time when Christianity was supported by wealthy patrons.[31] If it is historical, however, it indicates that certain women had significant resources at their own disposal and, more particularly, that Mary was Jesus' patron.

Scholars have been suspicious of these two bits of data, not only because they are given only in *Luke*, but also because they fit into *Luke*'s tendency to reduce the status of Mary Magdalene and indeed of women in general to subordinate roles, especially in comparison with the enhanced roles of Peter and "the twelve." *Luke* 8:1–3 is a good example.[32] This short passage describes the male disciples only as "the twelve" but readers will come to learn in the *Acts of the Apostles* that this group has preeminent responsibility for the preaching of the gospel and the founding of the church. The women disciples in contrast are described as recipients of healing and financial supporters, a description that has frequently been interpreted to indicate women's "natural" weakness and to limit women's roles to rendering financial support or material service that leaves men free to preach the gospel.[33] Even though she has been healed, the story of Mary's possession effectively portrays her as unclean and susceptible to demonic influence. It is hard not to read these two details in *Luke*'s description of Mary as an attempt to conceal her prominence rather than as a report of historical facts.

Since the eighteenth century, discoveries of unknown early

Christian literature from Egypt have greatly enhanced our knowledge of how Mary was portrayed in the first centuries of Christian beginnings.[34] Chief among them was a find of enormous significance near the village of Nag Hammadi in middle Egypt.[35] In 1945, a peasant had serendipitously uncovered a clay jar containing fourth-century papyrus books, including several which develop the early portrait of Mary as a prominent disciple of Jesus. These include the *Gospel of Thomas*, *First Apocalypse of James*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Gospel of Philip*.[36] Another important work is *Pistis Sophia*, inscribed in a fourth-century parchment codex that had already come to light in the eighteenth century.[37] It contains an extensive revelation dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, among whom Mary figures prominently. To these, we must of course add the *Gospel of Mary* from the Berlin Codex.[38]

These works often portray Mary as one of the interlocutors in dialogues of Jesus with his disciples. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, Mary questions Jesus and is one of only five disciples specifically named (logion 21). The disciples usually ask Jesus questions as a group, but two women, Mary and Salome, are singled out by name, each asking a single question. The only other named disciples are Thomas, Peter, and Matthew. The second-century work, *First Apocalypse of James*, suggests that James should turn to Mary and the other women for instruction. The passage is difficult because the manuscript is badly damaged, and a small hole is located precisely in the middle of the sentence about Mary. Antti Marjanen has restored the passage so that it reads as follows (with the restorations in square brackets). The Lord tells James: "'When you speak these words of [per]ception, be persuaded by the [word of] Salome and Mary [and Martha and Ars]inoe.'"[39] This mysterious command tells us nothing about what it is James can expect to learn from the women, but even this brief mention of Mary shows a high regard for her spiritual understanding, along with that of three other women disciples.

In another second-century writing, *Dialogue of the Savior*, Mary is named along with Judas Thomas and Matthew in the course of an extended dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. She speaks frequently and indeed she acts as a representative of the disciples as a group, addressing several questions to the Savior. She thus appears as a prominent disciple and is the only woman named.[40] Moreover, in response to a particularly insightful question, the Lord says of her, "'You make clear the abundance of the revealer!'" (*DSav* 140:17–19).

At another point after Mary has spoken, the narrator confirms, "She uttered this as a woman who had understood completely" (*DSav* 139:11–13). These statements make it clear that Mary is to be counted among the disciples who fully comprehended the Lord's teaching (*DSav* 142:11–13).

The *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, also from the second century, gives Mary a clear role as one of the seven women and twelve men gathered to hear the Savior after the resurrection, but before his ascension.[41] Of these only five are named and speak, including Mary.[42] At the end of his discourse, he tells them, "I have given you authority over all things as children of light," and they go forth in joy to preach the gospel (*SoJsChrNHC* III 119:4–6; BG 126:12–15). Mary is included among those special disciples to whom Jesus entrusted his most elevated teaching, and she is commissioned along with the other disciples to preach the gospel.

In the third-century text *Pistis Sophia*, Mary again appears to be preeminent among the disciples, especially in the first three of the four books.[43] She asks more questions than all the rest of the disciples together, and the Savior acknowledges that: "You are she whose heart is more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven than all your brothers."[44] Indeed, Mary steps in when the other disciples are in despair and intercedes with the Savior for them.[45] Her complete spiritual comprehension is repeatedly stressed.

All of these works contain extensive dialogues between Jesus and his disciples, and Mary is an active and vocal participant. She speaks frequently and often is praised for her insight. Other narratives contain little dialogue but still portray Mary as a prominent disciple. In the *Gospel of Philip*, for example, Mary Magdalene is explicitly mentioned as one of three Marys: "There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and her sister and (the) Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. For Mary is his sister and his mother and his companion" (*GPhil* 59:6–11). This formulation is intriguing for at first it distinguishes three distinct Marys: Jesus' mother, her sister (i.e., his aunt),[46] and his companion, who is explicitly identified as the Magdalene.[47] Yet the next sentence suggests that there is only a single Mary, one who is his mother, his sister, ***and*** his companion. The *Gospel of Phillip* wants its readers to see that these figures are more than literal, historical characters.[48] "Truth did not come into the world naked," says the author, "but it came in types

and images. (The world) will not receive (the truth) in any other way."[49] Mary is the image of a greater spiritual truth. How should we understand this passage? Of what truth is Mary the image? Scholars have made a number of suggestions, based in large part on a later passage where Mary is mentioned again. Unfortunately this section of the work is damaged. With the reconstruction again in square brackets, it reads:

> As for Wisdom who is called "the barren," she is the mother [of the] angels and the companion of the S[avior. Ma]ria the Mag[da]lene — (she is the one) the S[avior loved] more than [all] the disciples [and he] used to kiss her on her [mouth of]ten. The rest of [the disciples ...]. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than us?" The Savior replied; he said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? If a blind man and one who sees are both in the dark, they do not differ from each other. When the light comes, then the one who sees will see the light, and the one who is blind will remain in the dark" (*GPhil* 63:33–64:9).[50]

This passage presents several intriguing puzzles, but it also points toward some possible solutions: Why is Wisdom called "barren" if she is the mother of angels? Is Mary Magdalene identified with Wisdom here? Is that why the Savior loved her more than the other disciples? Does kissing mean that Mary and the Savior had a sexual relationship or was it a spiritual one? What does the Savior's parable mean in response to the disciple's question?

It seems that several ideas have been combined: Heavenly Wisdom is the mother of the powers that rule the cosmos; because of their evil, her fruit is "barren." But the heavenly Sophia became fruitful when she become the companion of the Savior through the Holy Spirit (see *GPhil* 59:30–60:1). Mary Magdalene, too, is the companion of the Savior because he loved her more than the rest of the disciples. If Mary is understood as Wisdom, that explains how she is at once mother, sister, and companion. She is the mother of the angels, his spiritual sister (since the son does not have children but siblings), and his female counterpart.

The next sentence provides a second interpretation. As in the *Gospel of Mary*, the male disciples are jealous and without understand-

ing. The *Gospel of Phillip* again offers literal images—kissing and jealousy—in order to interpret them spiritually. Kissing here apparently refers to the intimate reception of spiritual teaching, for not only does the Lord suggest that the male disciples should seek to be loved by him in the same way, but he also says: "And had the word gone out from that (heavenly) place, it would be nourished from the mouth and it would become perfect. For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another" (*GPhil* 58:34–59:6). This explains yet again how Mary is at once mother (for she conceives and gives birth to spiritual things through the kiss), his spiritual sister, and companion. This portrayal affirms the special relationship of Mary Magdalene to Jesus based on her spiritual perfection.

Yet at the same time that Mary Magdalene is lauded in these works, there are signs that she is becoming a center around which controversy swirls. We know that the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as an exemplary disciple was not always linked to a positive symbolization of the feminine or a positive view of women generally.[51] Even texts that emphasized her prominence could portray her as a controversial figure. For example, the author of the second-century *Dialogue of the Savior* praises Mary "as a woman who had understood completely" (139:12–15). But in the same work, women are categorically associated with sexuality:

> The Lord said, "Pray in the place where there is no woman."
>
> Matthew said, "'Pray in the place where there is [no woman],' he tells us, meaning 'Destroy the works of womanhood,' not because there is any other [manner of birth], but because they will cease [giving birth]."
>
> Mary said, "They will never be obliterated" (*DSav* 144:15–22).

Usually scholars interpret Mary's response as a confirmation of the Savior's command to "destroy the works of womanhood" by ascetic renunciation of reproduction, here clearly symboled solely by the feminine. As Antti Marjanen has argued, this use of female gendered language to condemn the material world, sexuality, and death hardly works to promote the status of women.[52] I have registered many a difference of opinion with colleagues about this passage, because it seems to me that Mary's response can also be read as resistance: the works of

womanhood will never be obliterated. Ann Brock agrees, arguing from a different passage:

> In one enigmatic section of the *Dialogue of the Savior* the Lord explains, "Whatever is from the truth does not die; whatever is from woman dies" (59). Taken by itself such a statement sounds misogynistic. However, in the very next line of dialogue, when Mary asks why then she has come to this place (60), the Lord responds, "<you have come> to reveal the greatness of the revealer." In other words, her purpose is not to procreate—what comes from procreation dies. She is instead to be part of revealing the revealer. The Lord's statement to her therefore diametrically opposes claims such as those in the pastoral epistles which contend "Salvation does not accrue to women because they bear resemblance to Christ, but rather because they bear children" *(1 Tim* 2:15*)*.[53]

At any rate, we must be careful not to appropriate these works uncritically as feminist resources simply on the basis of a positive portrayal of Mary, for they can also employ feminine imagery that denigrates femaleness.

The final saying in the *Gospel of Thomas*, probably tacked onto the end of the work by a later scribe, explicitly challenges the presence of Mary and the status of all women in the Christian community.

> Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven" (*GThom* 114).

Peter clearly wishes to exclude Mary simply on the basis of her being a woman, but Jesus defends Mary's spiritual status against the attack by suggesting that her womanhood is not a permanent impediment to salvation. In a symbol system where "female" codes body, sexuality, and materiality, and "male" codes mind and spirit, to "become male" means that women are expected to transcend their naturally lower material natures and become spiritual beings. Whether this was achieved through ascetic practice, ritual transformation, or a mythic

return to an androgynous Adamic state is unclear.[54] But in any case, Jesus' reply destabilizes the categorical fixity of gender: women are not simply women; they are potentially men. Sex and gender cease to be as self-evident as Peter would have it.[55] And yet Jesus' statement at best only moderates Peter's categorical sexism: women *as women* are apparently not worthy of life; they need to become male.

In the later third-century work, *Pistis Sophia*, Peter and Mary are again seen in conflict. Mary is the single most outspoken disciple in this work, and she wants to offer her interpretation of what has been said, but she complains, "I am afraid of Peter for he threatens me and he hates our race" (*PiSo* II. 71:2). The Lord defends Mary—rather weakly in my opinion—by affirming that no power can prevent anyone who is filled with the Spirit of light from interpreting the things that are being said. But this response, too, is less than ideal for women. Although Mary has clearly accused Peter of misogyny, the Savior's response does not condemn him, but simply explains that anyone who is "filled with the Spirit of light"—man or woman—has the capacity and the responsibility to speak. The point is that sex and gender are irrelevant to spiritual development. Moreover, while the *Pistis Sophia* recognizes the superiority of Mary's spiritual understanding, it relegates the tasks of preaching the gospels solely to the male disciples.[56]

The figure of Mary in the *Gospel of Mary* belongs to this tradition which portrays her as a prominent disciple, but more than any other early Christian text it presents an unflinchingly favorable portrait of her as a woman leader among the disciples. *The Gospel of Mary* is ascribed to Mary and indeed she is the most prominent character in it.[57] Although she is referred to only as "Mary," scholars have generally identified this figure with Mary Magdalene.[58] The *Gospel of Mary* portrays her as the ideal disciple and apostle. She is the only one who does not fear for her life at the departure of the Lord. The Savior himself praises her for her unwavering steadfastness. She is favored with a special vision of Jesus and receives advanced teaching about the fate of the soul and salvation. She comforts and instructs the other disciples, turning their attention toward the teaching of Jesus and toward the divine Good. While her teaching does not go unchallenged, in the end both the truth of her teachings and her authority to teach the male disciples are affirmed. She is portrayed as a prophetic visionary and as a leader among the disciples.

But this portrait of Mary is not the only one, as we all know. In

Western European art and literature, Mary Magdalene is most often portrayed as a repentant prostitute, the Christian model of female sexuality redeemed. She stands prominently with two other figures: Eve, the temptress whose sin brought all of humanity under the judgment of death and all women into just subjugation and obedience, and Mary, the virgin mother whose impossible sexuality both idealizes and frustrates the desires of real women. Together they have formed the three-legged base upon which normative Christian models of female identity are balanced.

Where did this portrait of Mary Magdalene as a repentant whore come from? Contrary to popular Western tradition, Mary Magdalene was never a prostitute.[59] Eastern Orthodox traditions have never portrayed her as one. She appears in the *Gospel of Mary* in a role closer to her actual position in early Christian history: an early and important disciple of Jesus and a leader in the early Christian movement. As with most of the other disciples, the very meagerness of what was known about Mary's life served only to fire the imaginations of later Christians, who elaborated her history in story and art according to their spiritual needs and political aims.[60]

In contrast to the prominent role she plays in the early literature we have just discussed, the early church fathers whose writings later become the basis for orthodoxy largely ignore Mary Magdalene. When they do mention her, however, they present her in a consistently favorable light.[61] She is usually mentioned to support points they are trying to make about the reality of the physical resurrection[62] or the nature of the soul.[63] Her name comes up most frequently in connection with the resurrected Jesus' enigmatic statement to her: "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (*John* 20:17). The fathers were concerned to counter any implication in this passage that Jesus' resurrection might not have been physical.[64] Their concern was not unfounded, since the passage belongs to the earliest appearance narratives which were based on visionary experiences, not on encounters with a resuscitated corpse.[65] No criticism was directed at Mary Magdalene for Jesus' reticence about letting Mary touch him. Indeed Tertullian praised Mary because she approached Jesus to touch him "out of love, not from curiosity, nor with Thomas' incredulity."[66] In Tertullian's mind, the issue was simply that it was too early for touching; the resurrection had to be completed by Jesus' ascent.[67]

Despite their respect for her as a witness to the resurrection, the

early church fathers seem to have had three problems with the gospel stories of Mary Magdalene, especially with the resurrection appearance in the *Gospel of John*:

1. Jesus' command not to touch him could be considered proof that his resurrection was not physical.
2. Since Mary was alone when she saw the Lord, her testimony could be questioned.
3. The fact that Jesus appeared to her first, gave her private teachings, and then sent her to instruct the other disciples seemed to elevate her status above the other disciples and give a woman authority to teach the male apostles.

Yet despite these issues, on the rare occasions when Mary of Magdala was discussed by the early church fathers, the image of her was largely positive.

From the fourth century onward, however, the tone began to shift. Later fathers had the same difficulty with her portrait in the gospels, but the answers they devised to address these problems resulted in a very new and different portrait of Mary Magdalene. They increasingly tended to explain Jesus' command not to touch him by arguing that Mary, unlike Thomas, was not worthy of touching the resurrected Lord because she lacked a full understanding of the resurrection and hence lacked true faith.[68] She was sent to the male apostles, it was argued, not to proclaim the good news of the resurrection, but so that her weakness could be supplemented by their strength.[69]

By conflating the account of the *Gospel of John* with that of the *Gospel of Matthew* 28:9, which tells of an appearance to at least two women, Origen had already argued that Mary was not *alone* in seeing the risen Lord.[70] The effect was to de-emphasize Mary's status as the *first* witness to the resurrection by making her only one member of a group.[71] It was nonetheless appropriate, the fathers began to argue, that a woman be the first to receive the redemption offered by Jesus through his resurrection, because it was after all—at least in their interpretation of the *Genesis* story[72]—a woman who had first brought sin into the world.[73] We begin to see references to Mary Magdalene as the second Eve, the woman whose faith in the resurrected Jesus overcame the offenses of first Eve.[74]

That Mary was reported to have received private instruction from the risen Jesus was a more difficult problem. By the end of the second

century, she had become closely associated with an interpretation of Jesus' teachings very different from what the church fathers were developing. The *Gospel of Mary* clearly presents such teachings, and both the content and the title of the work associate these "heretical" views with Mary. Discrediting her may therefore have been in part a strategy of the church fathers to counter the interpretation of Jesus being spread in works like the *Gospel of Mary*.[75]

Silence, it turned out, was not an effective strategy, since it left the imaginative field open to others. So starting in the fourth century, Christian theologians in the Latin West[76] began to construct an alternative story.[77] The first move was to associate Mary Magdalene with the unnamed sinner who anointed Jesus' feet in *Luke* 7:36–50. Further confusion resulted by conflating the account in *John* 12:1–8, in which Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus, with the anointing by the unnamed woman in the Lukan account. From this point, identifying Mary of Magdala with Mary of Bethany was but a short step. At the end of the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great gave a sermon in which he not only identified these figures, but drew the moral conclusion that would dominate the imagination of the West for centuries to come:

> She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? . . . It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.[78]

Once these initial identifications were secure, Mary Magdalene could be associated with every unnamed sinful woman in the gospels, includ-

ing the adulteress in *John* 8:1–11 and the Syrophoenician woman with her five and more "husbands" in *John* 4:7–30. Mary the apostle and teacher had become Mary the repentant whore.

This portrait of Mary as a prostitute and adulteress explained not only why she was unworthy to touch Jesus' resurrected body, it also reinforced the view that women were to be seen primarily in terms of their sexuality not their spiritual character. Thus for the fathers this fiction solved two problems at once by undermining both the teachings associated with Mary and women's capacity to take on leadership roles. She still maintained a prominent place in the tradition, but her radical heritage had been tamed or erased.

The overall picture sketched above accurately reflects the issues at stake and the positions that the church fathers took on those issues. To be sure, it is fairly difficult to keep all the Marys straight—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany, Mary the wife of Clopas (Jesus' aunt),[79] Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses[80] (or Joseph[81]), the "other" Mary[82]; nevertheless it is notable that the Eastern Churches never confused any of these Marys with unnamed prostitutes or adulteresses. Though it is not possible to judge the minds and motives of the church fathers—since the processes of theological tradition are highly complex and often not fully apparent even to those involved—the results of their efforts are clear. Their erroneous portrait of Mary undergirded a particular set of theological perspectives on the physical resurrection and the male prerogatives of church authority. While they accepted Mary as an important witness to the resurrection, they nonetheless firmly shaped their reading of the gospels to fit the sexist prejudice that women are naturally inferior to men and should not hold positions of authority over them.

They also fell into the patriarchal trap of defining women primarily by their sexual roles and their relations to men, as virgins, wives and mothers, widows, or prostitutes. Since the symbolic field of the virgin and mother was already held by another Mary, and our Mary was not known to have been married or widowed, that left only the prostitute option available. I think it is safe to say that if Mary Magdalene had not been figured in this role, some other character would necessarily have been invented to play it. Its symbolic significance was too great to ignore.

It is true that from early on the possibility had existed that Mary

Magdalene might emerge from the speculative fray as Jesus' wife and lover. The *Gospel of Philip* said that Jesus used to kiss her often, and in the *Gospel of Mary* Peter affirmed that Jesus loved her more than other women. The third-century church father Hippolytus also used erotic imagery to allegorize the *Song of Songs* into an intimate relationship of the Church to Christ by treating Mary of Magdala as the Church-Bride and Jesus as the Savior-Bridegroom.[83] Of course, the rise of celibacy to a position of central importance in determining Christian authority structures put an official damper on these kinds of speculations. Still, the notion of an erotic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene has surfaced at odd moments throughout Western history and is still capable of arousing a good deal of public ire.[84]

Yet the role of the repentant prostitute is symbolically appealing in its own right, and not just because the other options were closed off. It has proven itself to be a much more evocative figure than that of Mary as Jesus' wife or lover. The image of Mary as the redeemed sinner has nourished a deep empathy that resonates with our human imperfection, frailty, and mortality. A fallen redeemer figure has enormous power to redeem.[85] She holds out the possibility that purity and wholeness are never closed off; that redemption is always a possibility at hand. Despite the appropriation of sinful female sexuality for patriarchal aims, her rich tradition in story and art attests to the redemptive power of the repentant sinner.

And indeed Mary Magdalene has been a figure of importance not just for patriarchy, where too often Gregory's praise of a woman who "immolated herself" in order to burn out "every delight she had had in herself" has resulted in untold anguish, physical abuse, and self-destruction. Nonetheless, women are not only victims, but like all people are agents of their own lives, and so women have often interpreted her in ways that were unanticipated and no doubt not entirely welcomed. From the second to the twenty–first century, women prophets and preachers have continued to appeal to her to legitimate their own leadership roles.[86]

The stubborn and inflexible fact is that both women and men in Western society lack the option of an unambiguous symbolic tradition to draw upon. It was no one single factor, but the confluence of historical tradition with various theological problems, patriarchal prejudices, and human affections that converged to result in the complex portrait of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute and preacher.

The portrait was sustained over the centuries and flourished because of even more complex motives and aims.

In the end, two basic portraits of Mary Magdalene developed, each with many variations: one stressed her roles as a prominent disciple of Jesus, a visionary, and a spiritual teacher; the other painted her as a repentant prostitute whom Jesus forgave, a latter-day Eve turned from her sinful ways.[87] While both portraits have legendary aspects, only the first has any claim to historical truth. The portrait of Mary as a repentant prostitute is pure fiction with no historical foundation whatsoever. The historical Mary of Magdala was a prominent Jewish follower of Jesus, a visionary, and a leading apostle.

Chapter 14

The History of Christianity

Until now every treatment of the *Gospel of Mary* has characterized it as a work belonging to the second-century heresy called Gnosticism.[1] But there was no religion in antiquity called Gnosticism. Scholars invented the term in the process of categorizing the variety of early Christian heresies. As we said above, they divided the earliest types into two groups: Jewish Christianity and Gnosticism. Jewish Christianity is characterized by too much or too positive an appropriation of "Judaism"; Gnosticism by too little "Judaism" or too negative an attitude toward it.[2] Orthodoxy is just right, rejecting "Jewish error" but claiming the heritage of Scripture for its own. This typology establishes the "correct" relationship to Jewish Scripture and tradition as the single most important factor in defining normative Christian identity. These types, however, can be established only by hindsight, and even then they are not real entities, but only academic constructs. In other words, all the texts and persons grouped under these categories did exist in antiquity, but they never understood themselves to be Gnostics or Jewish Christians, let alone heretics. Calling them Gnostics is simply a shorthand method for labeling them as heretics while maintaining the appearance of impartiality. It disguises the

degree to which normative interests have pervaded supposedly objective and disinterested scholarship. I never call the *Gospel of Mary* a Gnostic text because there was no such thing as Gnosticism.[3]

It is true that all early Christians argued for the truth of their own theology and practice over against competing claims, but if we start out by dividing these groups into winners and losers, orthodoxy and heresy, it becomes impossible to see how early Christianity was really shaped. As I said above, this procedure obscures the complex dynamics of early Christian theology-making because it tends to treat all the "orthodox" texts primarily in terms of their similarities to each other and their differences from heresy, a procedure that obscures the real diversity of the New Testament literature and the processes by which the Nicene Creed and the canon were shaped. So, too, the enormous theological variety of the literature classified as Gnostic gets harmonized into an overly simplified and distorting monolithic ideology. This procedure makes it appear that all Gnostic texts say more or less the same thing, and permits their theology to be explained primarily in terms of how it deviates from the orthodox norm.

On the other hand, when historians set aside the anachronistic classification of early Christian literature into orthodox and heretical forms, analyzing both the similarities and the differences among the extant remains, then a much more complex picture emerges. It becomes possible to consider afresh what was at stake in how Christians formulated their beliefs and practices, and we come to see more clearly the dynamics of their interactions and the nature of the debates in which they were engaged. Eliminating these anachronistic terms of theological hindsight fosters a fundamental rethinking of the formation of early Christianity. Contemporary Christians may gain new insights and resources for reflecting on what it means to be a Christian in a pluralistic world, and for addressing the pressing need to rethink the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, Islam, and other religious traditions in order to meet the demands for social well-being and justice.

We can begin by considering how the master story of Christianity has been constructed.

Although Jesus and his earliest followers lived in the first century, Christianity as we know it was forged in the second to fourth centuries. These are the centuries in which creed and canon were shaped, in which the idea of the New Testament as a collection of books came into being, in which creedal statements gradually came into use as

gauges of correct belief. First-century Christians had no New Testament or Nicene Creed. For most observers this well-known fact has not seemed problematic; and since early Christians wrote and distributed these works, the New Testament texts and early creeds are indeed important primary source materials for the reconstruction of the history of early Christianity. Yet so fundamental are creed and canon to informing our very definition of what Christianity is, that it is almost impossible to imagine what Christianity was like without them. As a result, the period of Christian beginnings has almost unavoidably been read from hindsight through the lenses of later canon and creed. But if we can remove these lenses, the story of Christian beginnings may sound quite different from the way it has generally been told, as Elaine Pagels' groundbreaking book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, demonstrates.

Here is where the recent discovery of early Christian writings from Egypt is so utterly crucial. These writings are of inestimable importance in drawing aside the curtain of later perspectives behind which Christian beginnings lie, and exposing the vitality and diversity of early Christian life and reflection. They demonstrate that reading the story of Christian origins backwards through the lenses of canon and creed has given an account of the formation of only one kind of Christianity, and even that only partially. The fuller picture lets us see more clearly how the later Christianity of the New Testament and the Nicene Creed arose out of many different possibilities through experimentation, compromise, and very often conflict. The Nicene Creed emphasized that salvation came through the virgin birth, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, but some forms of Christianity focused almost solely on Jesus' teaching and did not even mention these doctrines. Some of them rejected the idea of a benevolent God requiring blood atonement for sin, seeing Jesus instead as the living messenger of reconciliation and spiritual truth.

Much of early Christian history has been a matter of adding details or making minor corrections to the basic plot provided by those who won for themselves the title of orthodoxy. With the discoveries of new primary texts, we have firsthand testimony from perspectives other than those of the orthodox writers who won. These texts retrieved from the dry sands of Egypt are allowing scholars to paint a much fuller picture of Christian beginnings and to approach the familiar stories and teachings with fresh perspectives.

We are only beginning to understand how radically the new texts

will affect our reading of early Christian history and, indeed, of ancient Mediterranean religion more generally. What is already clear, however, is that the study of this period is potentially fruitful for reflection about many contemporary concerns. The Mediterranean world in which Christianity appeared was in a period of rapid social change and religious experimentation. Traditional values and ways of life were being challenged and reshaped through contact with others; the family, gender roles, and sexuality were being redefined; local resistance to Roman rule often took religious form—whether by outright rebellion as in the Jewish revolts in Palestine, or more covertly by turning a crucified criminal named Jesus into an heroic symbol of resistance to worldly power and tyranny. It was a time in which a new "cult" called Christianity moved from the margins of society to become the official religion of the Roman empire. Such a period offers much to think about and a rich supply of material to think with.

Rethinking the history of this period is especially important for contemporary Christian communities, since it has been common, especially among Protestant groups, to appeal to the early church for definitions of what Christianity should be. This means that early Christian history continues to be a prominent site for theological politics, since it can legitimate or undermine contemporary practices and structures of authority. As a result, it is crucial that we get the story right.

The beginning is often portrayed as the ideal to which Christianity should aspire and conform. Here Jesus spoke to his disciples and the gospel was preached in truth. Here the churches were formed in the power of the Spirit and Christians lived in unity and love with one another. The mission was clear, and strong faith was forged in the fires of persecution.

But what happens if we tell the story differently? What if the beginning was a time of grappling and experimentation? What if the meaning of the gospel was not clear and Christians struggled to understand who Jesus was and what his violent death might mean? What if there were not unity and certainty at the beginning but Christians differed in their views and experiences and sometimes came into conflict and division? What if the earliest Christians don't model for us a fixed and certain path, but instead call us to emulate their struggles to make Christianity in our day? What might beginnings tell us then?

The first step in answering these questions is to scrutinize the version of early Christian history that has dominated contemporary per-

spectives. Unless we first understand what this history looks like, we will continue to use it uncritically and read the new material through old lenses of hindsight without recognizing the consequent distortion. Inevitably, an old wineskin filled with new wine will burst.

To appreciate the potential impact of recent discoveries, it is necessary to review the most widespread view of early Christian beginnings, what I shall call "the master story." The German historian Walther Bauer proposed that despite the seeming variety of historical narratives, the master story always presupposes the following elements:

1. Jesus reveals the pure doctrine to his apostles, partly before his death, and partly in the forty days before his ascension.
2. After Jesus' final departure, the apostles apportion the world among themselves, and each takes the unadulterated gospel to the land which has been allotted him.
3. Even after the death of the disciples the gospel branches out further. But now obstacles to it spring up within Christianity itself. The devil cannot resist sowing weeds in the divine wheat field—and he is successful at it. True Christians blinded by him abandon the pure doctrine. This development takes place in the following sequence: unbelief, right belief, wrong belief. There is scarcely the faintest notion anywhere that unbelief might be changed directly into what the church calls false belief.[4]

This master story asserts that an unbroken chain stretching from Jesus to the apostles and on to their successors in the church—elders, ministers, priests, and bishops—guaranteed the unity and uniformity of Christian belief and practice. This chain links modern Christianity securely with its historical origins in the life and deeds of its founder, Jesus the Christ. The correct form of this belief and practice is called "orthodoxy." It is inscribed in the New Testament canon and the Nicene creed, and enacted in such ritual performances as baptism, the Lord's supper or Eucharist meal, and ordination.

The narratives of the canonical gospels form the basis for this linear history. *Luke-Acts* in particular connects the ministry of Jesus with the foundation of the church through the sending of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' ascension. *Luke's* story of Christian beginnings was consolidated and extended by the fourth-century theologian Eusebius. He wrote the first comprehensive history of the church,

alleging that Christianity in its original unity, purity, and power had survived the attacks of Satan from both within (heresy) and without (persecution) in order to triumph finally in the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity. Constantine not only ended the persecutions, he became the patron of Christianity and attempted to arbitrate Christian disputes. It was he who convened the Council of Nicaea, which formulated the Creed that became the basic form of Christian confession and to a large degree defined orthodoxy at the beginning of the fourth century.

While the plot of the master story presents a powerful and compelling—if problematic— paradigm for religious belief and practice, it is poor history. First of all, the story is incomplete and noticeably slanted. The roles of women, for example, are almost completely submerged from view. In the master story, the male Jesus selects male disciples who pass on tradition to male bishops. Yet we know that in the early centuries and throughout Christian history, women played prominent roles as apostles, teachers, preachers, and prophets. Moreover, the use of normative terms like "orthodoxy" and "heresy" immediately designates who were the winners and losers, but in practice "heresy" can only be identified by hindsight, instituting the norms of a later age as the standard for the early period. Hence the logic of the story is circular: the New Testament and the Nicene Creed define orthodox Christianity, not only in the fourth century and beyond, but anachronistically in the previous centuries as well.

One consequence of the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy was that the viewpoints of other Christians were largely lost, surviving only in documents denouncing them. Until now. The clearest contribution of the recent discoveries is in providing a wealth of primary works that illustrate the plural character of early Christianity and offer alternative voices. They disclose a much more diverse Christianity than we had ever suspected; for the master story presents only two kinds of Christians: true Christians (the orthodox) and false Christians (the heretics). We now know that the real situation was much more complex. Not stark contrasts, but multiple levels of intersection and disjuncture best define the situation.

In the end, the master story of the early church and scholars' neat division of earliest Christianity into well-defined types are oversimplifications that misrepresent the experience of early Christians. The early churches were diverse communities in which difficult choices were made, compromises formed, and persuasion exerted. Early Christians

intensely debated such basic issues as the content and meaning of Jesus' teachings, the nature of salvation, the value of prophetic authority, the roles of women and slaves, and competing visions of ideal community. The New Testament and the Nicene Creed were not the starting points but the end products of debate and dispute, the result of experience and experimentation. As the new materials from Egypt demonstrate, the master story of Christian origins is not an impartial account of historical reality, but a construction representing the practices and viewpoints of some Christians, but not all. And just as the master story functioned to authorize the particular theology and practices of what later came to be orthodoxy, the invention of Gnosticism and Jewish Christianity by modern scholars continues that process in our own time.

If then we set this master story to one side, and with it the categories of orthodoxy and heresy as well as Gnosticism and Jewish Christianity, it becomes possible to read both the new works and familiar texts with new eyes. A few examples will help illustrate this point.

If we look at the earliest Christian works to survive, the letters of Paul, we see ample evidence of controversy within the earliest churches over the meaning of Jesus, the relationship of the Christ fellowships to Jewish law, women's roles, church organization and authority, to name but a few issues. The *Letter to the Galatians* notably illustrates the heated character of debates over whether Gentile men who have received salvation in Christ must undergo circumcision, and whether Christian communities should adhere to purity distinctions in their table fellowship. Rather than framing these issues as battles between true Christians and heretics (Judaizers), we should recognize Paul's letter as but one side of a story about early followers of Jesus working out what it means to be a Christian in a world where Jews and Gentiles are sharing meals together. No wonder that when people clashed over what it meant to accept Jesus as the Christ, the discussion grew heated. Some Christians held to the sincere conviction that accepting the gospel meant following the whole law of God. It was not an unreasonable position, but it was not the direction most communities would eventually take.

Similarly, the differences among New Testament books are perfectly understandable once we accept that the norm of early Christianity was theological diversity, not consensus. For example, one learns virtually nothing about the life and teachings of Jesus by

reading Paul's letters or the *Book of Revelation*. Paul is interested primarily in Christ's death and resurrection, and offers little about Jesus' life and teachings, while *Revelation* offers a cosmic Christ ruling in heaven but says little about the significance of the death and resurrection so crucial to Paul's theology. Or imagine what would happen if a Christian belonging to a community which knew only the *Gospel of Matthew* were to travel and encounter a community of Christians who had only Paul's letters. What discussions they would have had! In *Matthew*, Jesus says that he has come to fulfill every jot and tittle of the law; he chastises anyone who ignores any part of it, no matter how trivial.[5] Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*, on the other hand, teaches people that they do not need to follow the laws of circumcision and ritual purity for "no one shall be justified by works of the law."[6] What a debate they might have had about the role of the Mosaic law in Christian practice! Now imagine an even more complicated scenario—one which we could not have imagined before the discovery of the new texts—where a Christian who knows only the *Gospel of Mary* enters the conversation. This work rejects any law but Jesus' teaching, seeing excessive external regulation as a bar to the preaching and reception of the gospel.

But while these examples help us imagine the situation more accurately, they are misleading insofar as they imply that believers got their information about the content of Christian teaching and practice from written texts. As we noted earlier, most people in the ancient Mediterranean world did not read or write. People heard about Christianity primarily through preaching and teaching; they practiced Christianity primarily through prayer, singing, and table fellowship. At what point and how often the reading of texts would have been a part of Christian worship or instruction is unclear, but it is clear that the domination of the Bible in our own print culture is an entirely inaccurate model for imagining early Christian life.

Nonetheless the picture is accurate to the degree that it suggests that Christian communities had access to a considerable variety of materials and produced diverse versions of Christian thought and practice. We know that churches in different geographical areas had different written texts and oral traditions, so we cannot assume that all churches used or even knew about the same texts. Certainly they did not have a collection called the New Testament, nor did they all agree on what texts should be considered authoritative. For many, Scripture meant the Jewish Scriptures, now read as Christian texts.

Moreover, we can see the interests of later Christians at work in the formation of the early written works. The *Gospel of Mark* originally ended at 16:8 with the flight of the astonished women disciples from the empty tomb. The editorial process by which verses 9-20 were later added in order to domesticate Mark's unsettling conclusion says something about the attitude of early Christians toward their texts: the life of the community took priority over the fixity of literary works.

The multiformity of early Christianity becomes even more evident when we remove our canonical spectacles. All historians recognize that since the earliest churches lacked a New Testament, limiting the construction of early Christianity to the information given in the New Testament cannot give us the whole story. Historians have to take account of all those materials that are Christian, whether or not they came to reside in the canon, and even if they later were understood to be heretical.

Many of the works early Christians possessed—such as the *Gospel of the Hebrews* or the *Gospel of Barnabas*—remain lost to us. Others have surfaced among the discoveries from Egypt. Some of these, like the *Gospel of Truth*, were known to us only because their titles had been mentioned in surviving works. Others, such as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, were complete surprises. These new materials let us see more of the complexity and abundance of early Christian thought. For example, despite the enormous variety of the early Christian literature that eventually came to reside in the New Testament collection, all the New Testament texts conform to one perspective: that the death and resurrection of Jesus and his coming at the end of time are central to salvation. The Nicene creed emphasizes this point by making the death, resurrection, and second coming, along with the virgin birth, the central points that a Christian must affirm about Jesus:

> "I believe in ... one Lord Jesus Christ ... who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven ... "[7]

In view of the centrality of this position, it is astonishing to learn that some early Christian communities didn't think Jesus' death had any

saving value at all, and who were not looking for his return. What kind of Christians were these?

Among the newly discovered texts are several that emphasize the importance of Jesus' teaching for salvation—in contrast to the Nicene Creed which did not ask believers to affirm anything about the content of Jesus' teaching, or even that Jesus was a teacher. One of these is the *Gospel of Mary*. Two others are the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Truth*.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is an early collection of Jesus' sayings. It employs some dialogue, but in general lacks any kind of story line. It contains no account of Jesus' birth, his death, or resurrection. It does, however, refer to "the living Jesus," perhaps as a way of acknowledging his resurrection as well as his continuing presence. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, the focus of salvation clearly falls not on Jesus, but on his teaching: "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."[8] Indeed Jesus cautions the disciples not to follow a leader, but to look inside themselves for the kingdom.[9] Jesus is not portrayed here as the messiah, Christ, Lord, Son of Man, or Son of God. Saying 55 alludes to his death, but never suggests that his suffering could lead to salvation for others. Rather Jesus is presented in terms most similar to Jewish Wisdom speculation.

In Jewish tradition, Wisdom is described as the co-creator and first born of God,[10] as the light, the bringer of life and salvation,[11] as a teacher,[12] and as the designer and controller of history.[13] She comes down to humanity in a variety of guises to offer her wisdom, but is rejected.[14] Hidden even from the birds of the air, the place of Wisdom is known only to God.[15] Similarly, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus comes to humanity in the flesh, but finds everyone intoxicated with the world.[16] He is portrayed as the light found in all creation,[17] the drink that transforms and discloses what is hidden to revelation.[18] His teaching gives life; it reveals what is hidden in creation yet beyond human ability to perceive.[19] The *Gospel of Thomas* is meant to encourage people to seek the kingdom of God within themselves, to uncover the hidden wisdom of God in creation, and to reject worldly pursuits that lead one away from God. Those who do will find life and never taste death. Above all, it is Jesus' teaching that leads people to enlightenment and salvation.

The *Gospel of Truth* was written in the second century by the theologian Valentinus.[20] He was both a poet and a systematic thinker, and this theological treatise shows the complexity of his thought as

well as his poetic use of language. He interpreted Jesus, the Logos or Word of God, as the revelation of God in the world. The need for revelation, according to Valentinus, resulted from God's utter transcendence.[21] Because of his radical "otherness," he actually appears to be absent; this seeming absence means that the world is ignorant of him. Since evil and suffering are by definition the absence of God, knowing God overcomes evil. Jesus was sent to reveal the Father,[22] to be the presence of God in the world. He brings salvation as the teacher of divine knowledge.[23]

While the *Gospel of Truth* acknowledges that Jesus was persecuted and suffered on the cross,[24] it interprets the crucifixion as the publication of his teaching.[25] Jesus, the Word, was nailed like a public notice upon a wooden pole, the cross. In order to give a spiritual meaning to the cross, the *Gospel of Truth* interprets the wooden cross as a type of the *Genesis* tree of life, and Jesus as the incarnate Word,[26] a kind of book of revelation. The revelation of Jesus brings about a restoration to unity[27] with the Father by eliminating the deficiencies of ignorance and destroying all the defects of suffering. It brings about authentic existence and awakens people from their nightmare-like state.[28] The Spirit reveals the Son, and the Son's speech brings about the return to the Father,[29] eliminating error and showing the way like a shepherd. The return to the Father does not come about through an apocalyptic catastrophe; rather it is described as a gentle attraction, a fragrance and merciful ointment. Souls are said to participate in the Father "by means of kisses." The work states explicitly that it is wrong to think of God as harsh or wrathful; rather he is without evil, imperturbable, sweet, and all-knowing.[30] The final goal of salvation is rest in the Father.[31]

In the *Gospel of Truth*, we meet with many elements common to New Testament portrayals of Jesus, such as the incarnation, crucifixion, and the image of Jesus as the Word; but all these elements are interpreted very differently. People do not need to be saved from sin, but from error, anguish, and terror. Jesus is incarnate, he suffers and dies, but his suffering and death are not saving in themselves. As in the *Gospel of Mary*, one is redeemed *from* suffering not *by* suffering. Jesus' ordeal is only an example of the general human condition associated with the body and the antagonism wrought by malicious error in the face of the truth. Jesus became a human being not in order to suffer as an atoning sacrifice for human sin, but to bring the revelation of saving truth. In a theology like this one, martyrdom can be

seen as a rational and even necessary alternative to denying Christ, but at the same time there is no enthusiasm for it, since martyrdom does not itself bring salvation. Suffering and death belong to the nature of the perishable body. From the *Gospel of Truth*'s perspective, God does not desire human suffering; in his compassion he wants to save people from it.

Anyone who is acquainted with the New Testament gospels will find much that seems familiar in these three new gospels, for they all imbibed from the same pool of early Christian tradition. Their authors drew on similar traditions, but shaped them along different lines, due no doubt in part to the different backgrounds, needs, and experiences of their diverse Christian communities. They all affirmed Jesus as savior, but how they understood salvation differed.

Despite the considerable debate and tension among Christians during the first two centuries, early Christian theology and practice were fairly fluid affairs in this period. By the third century, lines hardened as it became increasingly clear that theological views had direct consequences for some very pressing issues. Two new texts dating from the third century, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Testimony of Truth*, address some of these issues from perspectives that are new to us.

Like the other rediscovered texts we have discussed, the *Apocalypse of Peter* rejects the saving value of Jesus' death on the cross, but it does so vehemently, calling cross theology an evil "error." It charges that:

> they cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error, and into the hand of an evil, cunning man and a manifold dogma and they will be ruled heretically (*ApocPet* 74:13–21).

It is not clear what the "name of error" refers to nor who is to be identified as the "evil, cunning man" (perhaps Paul?). But the references to "manifold dogma" and being "ruled heretically" clearly demonstrate that one issue at stake in cross theology was authority. The *Apocalypse of Peter* rejects the position that the legitimacy to rule others was grounded in the dogma of the crucifixion.

Another issue was that the rejection of Jesus' death as a saving event had direct consequences for attitudes toward martyrdom. The *Testimony of Truth* claims:

> But when they are "perfected" with a martyr's death, this is the thought that they have within them: "If we deliver ourselves over to death for the sake of the Name we will be saved." These matters are not settled in this way (*TestTruth* 34:1–7).

In an age of increased persecution, the rejection of martyrdom was no doubt an issue over which feelings ran very high. Moreover, rejection of the saving character of Jesus' death and resurrection meant that baptism, the central rite of entry into the Christian community, could not be understood as a reenactment of Christ's death and resurrection as it had been for Paul.[32] Instead, the *Testimony of Truth* argues:

> There are some who, upon entering the faith, receive a baptism on the ground that they have it as a hope of salvation... But the Son of Man did not baptize any of his disciples... If those who are baptized were headed for life, the world would become empty ... But the baptism of truth is something else; it is by renunciation of the world that it is found (*TestTruth* 69:7–24).

Rejecting the idea that being immersed in water is sufficient for salvation, these Christians interpreted baptism allegorically to signify renunciation of the world and reorientation toward God.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Testimony of Truth* oppose the theological centrality of Jesus' crucifixion, a basic element of what would become Nicene orthodoxy. For orthodoxy, the authority of the apostles was based on their being witnesses to the death and resurrection. That authority was then thought to be passed on through ordination, and thus the basis for the hierarchical organization of the church was laid. The apostles were considered to be the guarantors of the true teaching of the church, and male bishops claimed to be their sole legitimate successors. This male model of discipleship also provided (and often continues to provide) a rationale for the exclusion of women from leadership roles, ignoring the presence of women disciples throughout Jesus' ministry, at the crucifixion, and as the first witnesses to the resurrection. The theological emphasis on the saving nature of the bodily incarnation, suffering, and death of Jesus was tied directly to an ethics of sin and judgment, as well as a model for martyrdom. All of these elements of Nicene orthodoxy had already been contested by other strains of early Christianity that instead offered teaching on

the basis of unmediated revelation and illumination. They emphasized the importance of inner spirituality and an ethics of internal purity, freedom, and resistance to injustice. Authority within the community was based on spiritual achievement, maturity, and prophetic inspiration. These Christians emphatically denied that a good God would desire the suffering and death of his son or his followers.

The struggle to understand the meaning of Jesus on the cross continues to be a living issue for Christians. There are some people who would basically agree with the views of these rediscovered texts, that the figure of Jesus on the cross is incompatible with their belief in the goodness of God. And yet the scandalous image of God suffering on the cross has functioned for many to confer meaningfulness and redemptive power to the human experience of suffering. The issue in today's world is complex, for there are cases where the symbolism of the cross has justified a variety of forms of abuse, including anti-Judaism; it has supported continued suffering rather than empowered people to struggle against injustice. The Catholic liberation theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that if Christians are to keep the cross, the redemptive power of this symbol has to lie in its capacity to lead people to solidarity with the poor and the suffering, to stand in the hope of the resurrection. The early Christian debate over the meaning of Jesus on the cross goes to the heart of these and other vital issues. In the end, Christians and others may or may not think that Nicene theologians were right in their rejection of the views illuminated by the new texts. But either way, examining these controversies makes it possible to gain a much richer grasp of the meaning of Christian teachings.

The central challenge, facing anyone interested in the full history of Christianity, is to comprehend the meaning of these new materials in their own right. So powerful is the later Christian tradition, that it is all but impossible to read these new materials without automatically and unreflectively placing them into the old structure of the master story, assuming the normative status of the later canon and creed and reading these new materials as deviant. The perspective of the master story is fundamentally ingrained not only in Christian theology, but also in the imagination of historians. It is extremely difficult to think our way out of imagining that early Christians had a New Testament, or that Jesus established and authorized the religion of the Nicene Creed. The standards of orthodoxy and heresy, the appeal to Christian origins for authorization, and the normative status of canon and creed,

all continue to exert an enormous amount of influence, even among scholars. But the new works from the Egyptian desert are proving to be very helpful. They allow us to see the degree to which the master story of Christian origins is not a naively "literal" and impartial factual account, and they are helping us construct a more complete narrative that will reflect the particular interests and perspectives of diverse Christians engaged in experimentation, compromise, collaboration, and synthesis.

What will this new story look like? The final answer to this question lies somewhere in the future. We are only beginning to construct the pieces of a fuller and more accurate narrative of Christian beginnings. At this point I can only say that it will be a story of diverse groups of people engaged in the difficult business of working out what it means to be a Christian in a world of rapid social change, increased inter-cultural contact, and dominated overall by Roman imperial power. The story will talk about the issues that concerned the first Christians, their differences of opinion, the debates they had, and the solutions they devised, both successes and failures. It will portray some of them as pretty radical social experimenters, and others as more willing to compromise with the values of the dominant culture. It will talk about the kind of communities they formed, about the utopian ideals of a loving God they nourished, and the burning desire for justice and for revenge that moved their imaginations.

By this point, it should be clear that the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" or "Gnosticism" and "Jewish Christianity" do not belong to impartial historical description. They were developed to identify the winners and losers in inner-Christian debate. Within this bifurcating frame, the new texts are relegated to the side that lost out, and therefore people might wrongly conclude that these views had no further place in Christian history after the establishment of Nicene orthodoxy in the fourth century. This conclusion would, however, be misleading and incomplete.

Despite the fact that many of these views were decried as "heretical," they have had a lasting influence. The positions of the "heresies" were only partially rejected. The portrayal of Jesus as a teacher of divine wisdom, the power of his words and deeds to transform lives, the understanding of his crucifixion as a call to overcome ignorance and suffering, the resurrection as a triumph over unjust domination, the authority of the prophetic spirit, the continued enactment of women's leadership and theology-making despite continued opposi-

tion, the insistence that baptism must be more than a magical rite of cleansing, the body as a site of resistance to worldly values, the paving of a mystical path to God through knowledge and love—all these ideas and practices were maintained inside of Christianity, and indeed they continue to evoke devotion and controversy down to the present day. It would indeed be impossible to imagine Christianity without them. The new discoveries perhaps allow us better to imagine Christianity with them.

The Gospel of Mary

We can now return to our earlier question: Is the *Gospel of Mary* gnostic? From the first publication of the *Gospel of Mary*, its gnostic character was assumed.[33] Some scholars early on argued that the controversy in the *Gospel of Mary* represented an historical situation of conflict between gnostic and orthodox Christians. Perkins, for example, suggested that Mary represents the gnostic position, while Peter represents the orthodox.[34] These views continue to be very much alive in studies of the *Gospel of Mary*, and most have presupposed that a gnostic myth[35] or typical gnostic themes[36] lie behind the work.

One way scholars have supported this position is by comparing the teaching of the *Gospel of Mary* with standard interpretations of the New Testament,[37] thereby anachronistically setting up a contemporary understanding of orthodox Christianity against which the *Gospel of Mary* fails. Having assumed in advance that the *Gospel of Mary* is heretical, scholars only had to ask what kind of heresy it was. At this point, they turned to descriptions of Gnosticism that scholars had constructed out of an enormously varied group of materials whose only real common denominator was that they showed too few "Jewish" elements or too negative an attitude toward "Judaism." They drew heavily upon early church polemics to construct a unified picture of Gnostic heresy, reproducing the arguments of polemicists like Irenaeus of Lyon. The heretics, he claimed, rejected the God of the Hebrew Bible as the true God and creator of the cosmos. Against what he saw as the clear evidence of Scripture, they denied the divine goodness of both the creator and the creation. Moreover, they undermined salvation by denying that Jesus had had a physical body, and that believers would rise physically from the dead even as Jesus had. They actually allowed women to preach and preside over the Eucharist and presumptuously claimed that only a spiritual elite would be "saved by

nature" due to their heavenly origin; salvation came not by faith in Christ but through knowledge revealed only to them. In Irenaeus' view, such positions were arrogant as well as erroneous. In general, the polemicists objected that these beliefs implied that humanity did not need a savior, and that the moral efforts of instruction, purification, and good works were unnecessary. It was false belief, they claimed, that led the heretics to reject the authority of the legitimate successors of the apostles—the bishops and the priests of the true Church. This kind of theology, they claimed, could lead only to amoral or immoral practices, whether ascetic or libertine. Increasingly, however, scholars are coming to recognize the biased perspectives of these denunciations. The new texts from Egypt have been central to rethinking the history of early Christianity, in part because they show no evidence of the immorality or elitism described by the polemicists.[38]

It is equally difficult to reconcile the *Gospel of Mary* with the typical scholarly construction of Gnosticism. It promotes neither immorality nor elitism, but rather argues for the necessity of purification from evil and implies that all persons are spiritual by nature. Some themes in the work that have been identified as "Gnostic," such as the rise of the soul as release from matter or the distinction between inner and outer, are commonplaces of ancient philosophy. Nor are the most characteristic themes ascribed to Gnosticism, such as the distinction between a lower demiurgic creator and a higher transcendent Deity, present in the *Gospel of Mary*. It does clearly argue that the resurrection is spiritual, not physical, and affirms that women can serve as teachers and preachers, but these themes are not sufficient to characterize the *Gospel of Mary* as Gnostic. Clearly what marks the text as Gnostic in the eyes of theologically-minded historians is the *Gospel of Mary*'s lack of any strong ties to Jewish tradition; it is rather, as I have argued, primarily a product of Gentile Christians.

To be sure, its position on women's leadership is no doubt a factor in its being labeled heresy. Yet the nature of the resurrection and the legitimacy of women's leadership—as well as notions about the rise of the soul as release from matter, salvation as an inner process of turning toward God, and a Christology that either rejects or simply does not include the notion of Christ as judge—are all ideas that early Christians experimented with in their theology-making. The fact that the views of the *Gospel of Mary* did not prevail does not mean that they were regarded as non-Christian in their own day. Rather the conflict between the disciples in the *Gospel of Mary* shows all the markers

of intra-Christian conflict in which proponents of different views cannot yet appeal to such fixed norms as the New Testament canon or the Nicene Creed.

Scholars have long felt that the conflict between Peter and Mary is the key to determining where to fit the *Gospel of Mary* into the story of early Christianity. Although Andrew attacks Mary and Levi defends her, both play only supporting roles in what is predominantly a conflict between Mary and Peter. It was Peter who in the first place had asked Mary to speak, and she responds only to him in defending herself. This scene has roots deep in a tradition of the two apostles in competition with one another. The chronological and geographical spread of the tradition about Mary and Peter in conflict did not follow a single trajectory, but was widely dispersed. Anne Brock has traced the seeds of this conflict in the earliest Christian literature, noting that Peter and Mary are the only two of Jesus' immediate followers reported to have received individual resurrection appearances; otherwise all appearances are to groups of Jesus' followers. Moreover, different works identify either Peter or Mary as the first to receive an appearance, putting them in competition for that preeminent status.[39] In *1 Cor* 15:3–5, Paul confers the honor upon Peter, but in the *Gospel of John* Mary is the first to see and speak with the risen Lord and the first commissioned to proclaim the good news of the resurrection (*John* 20:11–18).[40] Brock further observes that works that magnify Peter's status tend to reduce Mary Magdalene's role (for example, in the *Gospel of Luke*), while texts in which Mary Magdalene plays an important role, especially as witness to the resurrection, accord Peter a significantly less prominent status (for example, *John* 20). She further suggests that the overt competition between Mary and Peter in such later works as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Thomas* continues this early and widespread tradition.[41] Moreover, the stories of Peter and Mary seem to be connected to disputes over women's authority. Mary texts offer a strong basis for legitimating women's leadership, while texts where Peter is figured as the apostolic authority consistently do not present arguments supporting the role of female leaders; rather the role of women is effectively modeled in women's absence, silence or submission.[42]

Brock's study helps explain why the competition between the two was both pervasive and heated. Already in Paul's letters, a strong link had been forged between receiving a resurrection appearance, appointment as an apostle, and authority for the content of his gospel.[43] This

powerful conjunction led early Christian groups to appeal to specific apostles to substantiate and authorize their teachings and practices. Certainly this is the case for the *Gospel of Mary*; it demonstrates unequivocally that Mary had become a figure to whom some Christians appealed in order to defend and promote their views of the meaning of Jesus' teachings, the basis for leadership, and the roles of women.

The repeated concern over the Savior's demand that the disciples preach the gospel gives these topics a special emphasis in the *Gospel of Mary*. The dialogues explore at length the closely related issues of who has understood the gospel and who has the authority to preach. The *Gospel of Mary* was written at a time when the answers to these questions were not yet settled. Since no one could appeal to a fixed canon or creed, the *Gospel of Mary* resolves the issue by contrasting Mary's character with that of Peter. The charges that he and Andrew make against her illustrate what was at stake: the content of the Savior's teaching, the right of women to instruct men, and the criteria to be used to judge apostolic authority. Any hesitation about Mary's status and the truth of the *Gospel of Mary*'s teaching is swept away by Levi's defense. The Savior knew her completely and loved her more than the other disciples, even the men, because she had understood and appropriated his teachings and attained a stability of character that the other disciples lacked. Because of her steadfastness, he had granted her special revelation. The message is clear: only those apostles who have attained the same level of spiritual development as Mary can be trusted to teach the true gospel.

Other scholars have suggested that more may be read into the conflict between Mary and Peter than I have found. Mary Thompson, for example, suggests that "It is difficult, if not dangerous, to read these gospels with too literal an interpretation, but the continuing presence of conflict between Peter and Mary of Magdala is pervasive and gives rise at least to the suspicion that there was such a conflict in the early churches and the disciples of Mary of Magdala may well have been in serious conflict with the disciples of Peter."[44] While intriguing, the suggestion is difficult, as she notes. The tradition is too widespread to limit the conflict to only two groups.

More frequently, Peter and Mary are taken as representatives of orthodox and Gnostic forms of Christianity.[45] This position assumes that the *Gospel of Mary* is Gnostic, and because Mary is the apostolic guarantor of that teaching, she becomes a representative of

Gnosticism. The seeming persuasiveness of this position stems only from the power of hindsight. Gazing back at the second century from the position of the twenty-first century, we know that the teaching of the *Gospel of Mary* lost out in the battle for theological hegemony. We know, too, that Peter became the preeminent representative of orthodoxy. Knowing all this makes it nearly impossible *not* to read the conflict between Mary and Peter as one between heretical and orthodox forms of Christianity. But no one in the second century would have seen it that way because they could not have known what we know. What matters at this point is not whether Gnosticism ever existed, but whether the conflict among the apostles in the *Gospel of Mary* can be taken as an intentional conflict of orthodox versus gnostic disciples. The answer to that question is no. In framing the problem as a conflict between orthodox and heretical Christians, we miss the historical significance of the work's own rhetoric of conflict and the complex dynamics of early Christian social and theological formation.

The *Gospel of Mary* frames the conflict in terms of preaching the gospel and the character of the apostles, but these concerns can be obscured when our reading becomes entangled in the substance and rhetoric of later controversies, when hindsight leads us to imagine that the conflict was about issues that only arose later. For example, some scholars have suggested that the real conflict in the *Gospel of Mary* was over whether authority should be grounded in apostolic succession or prophetic experience. Elaine Pagels has argued that the controversy among the disciples reflects the tension between later priests and bishops who claimed authority based on seeing themselves as the successors of the immediate followers of Jesus—represented in the text by Peter and Andrew—and those who thought authority should be based on spiritual gifts, especially prophetic experience—represented by Mary Magdalene.[46] Indeed "Gnostics," she says, "recognized three sources of revelation apart from the common tradition mediated through the apostles": from secret apostolic tradition, from visions, and from within oneself, through direct spiritual experience and inspiration.[47] All three apply to the *Gospel of Mary*.[48]

In my own work, I too have argued that Mary's vision took place after the resurrection, in which case this revelation would potentially be in competition with transmission of the public ministry since its content augmented or even altered Jesus' public teaching.[49] I had assumed that the account of her vision began with the statement, "I saw the Lord in a vision, and I said to him, 'Lord, today I saw you in

a vision,'" and continued through Mary's account of the final rise of the soul to rest. Judith Hartenstein argues, however, that Mary is reporting on a vision she had had during the ministry of the historical Jesus and a conversation with him later the same day about the vision. In this case, she argues, the *Gospel of Mary* is "no reference for continuing revelation through visions."[50] Instead, she insists, the topic of the vision was brought up only as a starting point for the discussion of how visions take place. This point is confirmed, she continues, by the fact that Peter objects only to the idea of Mary's having received special teaching in private, not to her having received it through visions.[51]

I think Hartenstein's point is wonderfully insightful. It solves the problem of Mary's use of the perfect tense with the present ("I *saw* you in a vision *today*"), and the oddness of discussing the visionary experience within the vision itself.[52] It still leaves the problem of the oddity of having a vision of Jesus and then seeing the earthly Jesus later on the same day, but here Hartenstein points to the transfiguration in *Matt* 17:1-13.[53] If Mary's vision took place during the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus, it could imply that she saw him as he truly was in all his glory and therefore understood his divine nature already during his public ministry.[54] That would also make sense of the Savior's response to Mary: "Blessed are you for not wavering at the sight of me" (*GosMary* 7:3). At any rate, as Hartenstein points out, Mary's vision and her stability point toward her worthiness to receive special teaching from Jesus.[55] The issue is not whether teaching relies upon the historical Jesus or upon continuing visions;[56] that conflict belongs to a later time. In the *Gospel of Mary*, all the Savior's teaching is given in a post-resurrection vision so the conflict between Peter and Mary has to be based on something else. Only Mary's teaching and her role as beloved disciple is challenged. That points to Mary as herself the focus of the conflict.

One final suggestion scholars have proposed is that the conflict pits the twelve against all comers. Hartenstein notes, again perceptively, that the *Gospel of Mary*'s choice of characters sets two of the twelve (Peter and Andrew) over against two who did not number among the twelve (Mary and Levi).[57] That choice might indicate that the *Gospel of Mary*'s author is directing an all-but-explicit polemic against locating apostolic authority solely with twelve male disciples. Yet as we've already noted, Mary's status as an apostle is not in question and therefore doesn't need to be defended.[58] The issue arises for modern scholars only by assuming hegemonic notions associating

apostleship with men only. Indeed early studies of the *Gospel of Mary* assumed that Mary was not an apostle,[59] but Helmut Koester has shown that limiting the appellation "apostle" to a small group of male disciples (especially the twelve) was only one way in which the term was used in the first two centuries of Christianity.[60] Bernadette Brooten, for example, has demonstrated that Paul used the term "apostle" of a woman, Junia, in *Rom* 16:7.[61] The work of Ann Brock on the figures of Peter and Mary in early Christian tradition further supports the view that apostolic authority was not limited to the twelve in early tradition.[62] She argues that the tradition of the twelve and the connection with Peter was first formulated in the *Gospel of Luke*, but only slowly became a widespread paradigm. The competition between Peter and Mary, on the other hand, had its roots in the pre-Pauline and pre-gospel tradition. Mary's role in the *Gospel of Mary* presumes that she was regarded by the readers as an apostle—that is, as one of those who received the Savior's commission to go forth and preach the gospel.[63] It would seem that the *Gospel of Mary* reflects a time and place at which the exclusive tradition of the twelve was not fixed.

Indeed, our concerns about whether women were numbered among the apostles, tied as it to contemporary arguments for or against women's ordination, was simply not an issue to such a community, although the *Gospel of Mary* is concerned to protect the right of women to preach and teach against opposition such as Peter's. The controversy between Mary and Peter is not about who is an apostle—indeed the term is never used—but about who has understood and appropriated the teachings of the Savior. The question at issue is who is able to preach the gospel. The *Gospel of Mary* is quite clear that neither following Jesus, nor encountering the risen Lord, nor receiving his teaching and commission—nor for that matter all three together—is sufficient. All the disciples received teaching and commission, but only Mary is figured as a model disciple. Only Levi defends her. By portraying the other disciples, especially Andrew and Peter, as divisive and uncomprehending even after the resurrection, and by contrasting them with the steadfastness of Mary, the *Gospel of Mary* clearly questions apostolic witness alone as a sufficient basis for preaching the gospel.

As was noted above, the choice of these two characters was no accident. Early traditions that Mary saw the risen Lord and was an important follower of Jesus no doubt weighed heavily in casting her

to play a similar role in the *Gospel of Mary*. Peter, too, was a good candidate for his role. It is important to remember that while Peter eventually became central to the patriarchal hierarchy of the church, in the early period his character was more fluid.[64] The *Gospel of Mary* did not choose him because he was already associated with a developed position on apostolic authority, but because he was known to be impulsive, uncomprehending, and fearful. In the *Gospel of Mary* Peter is portrayed as a jealous and contentious character, who cannot see beyond his own male pride and who clearly has not achieved inner stability and peace. He represents the folly of naively trusting the witness of the apostles in order to understand Jesus' teaching. And Mary, not yet tendentiously transformed into a repentant prostitute, is consistently represented as a faithful disciple.

The portrait of Mary Magdalene in the *Gospel of Mary* offers an alternative to apostolic witness as the sole source of authority. Although she too knew the historical Jesus, was a witness to the resurrection, and received instruction from the Savior, these experiences are not what set her apart from the others. Rather it is her exemplary discipleship. She doesn't falter when the Savior departs, but steps into his place, comforting, strengthening, and instructing the others. The superior spiritual comprehension and maturity demonstrated in her calm behavior and especially in her prophetic experience form the basis for her legitimate exercise of authority in instructing the other disciples. She does not teach in her own name, but passes on the words of the Savior, calming the disciples and turning their hearts toward the Good. This portrayal constitutes an explicit argument that the sure source of truth and authority can be confirmed only by the character of the disciple.

I would argue that the contrasting portrayal of the disciples in the *Gospel of Mary* is not aimed against the twelve, nor to support Gnostics against orthodox, nor visionaries against apostolic witnesses. The problem being addressed is rather that of criteria: The *Gospel of Mary* was written at a time when the truth of Christian teaching could not be settled by appeal to a commonly accepted rule of faith or canon of gospel literature, let alone an established leadership. The *Gospel of Mary* framed the issue as a matter of character: Who can be relied upon to preach the gospel? The argument for the truth of its teaching is based on a contrast between Mary's character and Peter's. Peter represents the error of assuming that simply having heard the teaching of Jesus is enough to ensure that one has actually understood it.

Andrew, as Peter's brother, seems to be guilty by association. Mary, on the other hand, is consistently represented as the faithful disciple. To read more into the controversy would anachronistically assume a fixity of theological positions and hierarchical practices that did not yet exist.

Framing the issue as one of character places the *Gospel of Mary* firmly in the context of early Christian practice, where the standard method to distinguish true prophets or teachers from false ones was by examining their character and behavior. Today we distinguish quite sharply between teachers and prophets, but in antiquity the line between them was much more blurred. Since all truth was understood to be divinely inspired, Christian prophets played a variety of leadership roles—prophesying and speaking in tongues, offering prayer, providing guidance, interpreting scripture, and teaching—and clear distinctions were not always made among these functions and their accompanying roles of leadership. For example, in the late first-century work *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (commonly called the *Didache*), the earliest Christian work on church order, the prophet not only provides instruction, but also performs the eucharist and leads prayer.[65] In particular, teaching was connected with the gift of prophetic inspiration. Even where the role of teacher had become formalized, it was still connected with prophetic inspiration.[66] *1 Timothy*, for example, indicates that the roles of public reading of scripture, preaching, and teaching were conferred at once by prophetic utterance and the laying on of hands by a council of elders (*1 Tim* 4:13–14).[67] In the third century, Tertullian provides a description of a woman prophet in his congregation:

> We have now amongst us a sister whose lot it has been to be favored with sundry gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord's day in the church: she converses with angels and sometimes even with the Lord; she both sees and hears mysterious communications; some hearts she understands, and she distributes remedies to those who are in need. Whether it be in the reading of Scriptures, or in the chanting of psalms, or in the preaching of sermons, or in the offering up of prayers, in all these religious services matter and opportunity are afforded to her of seeing visions. It may possibly have happened to us, while this sister of ours was rapt in the Spirit, that we had discoursed in some ineffable way about the soul.

> After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever things she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care in order that their truth may be probed). "Amongst other things," says she, "there has been shown to me a soul in bodily shape, and a spirit has been in the habit of appearing to me; not, however, a void and empty illusion, but such as would offer itself to be even grasped by the hand, soft and transparent and of an ethereal color, and in form resembling that of a human being in every respect." This was her vision, and for her witness there was God, as well as the apostle (Paul) who most assuredly foretold that there were to be "spiritual gifts" in the church.[68]

This unnamed woman prophet was clearly respected; she functioned not only as a visionary, but also acted as a counselor and healer.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, it is Mary Magdalene who plays the role of the prophetic teacher.[69] Not only does she have a vision of the Lord,[70] but she assumes the roles of comforter and teacher to the other disciples, admonishing them to be resolute. She turns their hearts toward the "Good" so that they begin to discuss the words of the Savior. She steps into the Savior's roles as the mediator of saving wisdom. The authority she exercises is not that of judge or ruler, but spiritual guide and instructor.

Because of the widespread belief in antiquity that the gods spoke through human vessels, prophets potentially had enormous power to direct people's lives, political events, and public opinion. Diviners and oracles were consulted by senates, kings, and emperors, who yet sometimes forbade inquiry into politically sensitive areas, such as the emperor's health.[71] Since prophecy represented a dramatic claim to authority, both for the prophet and for the message, serious issues of power were at stake in distinguishing true from false prophets. In the culture of early Christianity, if people were to accept that Mary's teaching came from a true vision of the Savior, her authority and teaching would be unquestioned. The problem was how to determine if it was an authentic vision. From a Christian perspective, the issue was theoretically simple: True prophets were inspired by divine agency; false prophets were inspired by the Devil and his demons.[72] In practice, distinguishing the two was trickier.

The problem was that it wasn't possible to tell on formal grounds.

The ideal way to assess a prophet's inspiration was to see whether his or her prophecy came true. But often this was impossible, either because the prophecy did not entail a future prediction or because it was too soon to tell. A more serviceable criterion focused on the moral character and behavior of the prophet. As Justin put it, prophetic vision is possible only for those "as shall live justly, purified by righteousness, and by every other virtue."[73] The eminently practical *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* suggested that "the false prophet and the true prophet can be known from their behavior."[74] If a prophet stays one or two days, he or she is a true prophet; if three days, a false prophet. If a prophet in a trance orders a meal for himself or demands money, he is a false prophet.[75] And so on. Such precautions were no doubt necessary, since it was possible for con artists to prey upon the goodwill of Christian charity, as well as on people's credulity.[76]

The widespread assumption that the prophet needed to be morally spotless and spiritually mature in order to be a channel for the divine Spirit also provided material for intra-Christian polemics. A common way to disparage opponents was to slander their moral character. Accusing heretics of moral depravity was meant not only to portray them as hypocrites, but also to prove that they were vessels not of the Holy Spirit but of demons.[77] One particularly clear example is Tertullian's condemnation of the prophet Philumene. After twice calling her a "virgin" and affirming that she had a "vigorous spirit," he then dismisses her completely with the unsubstantiated charge that later she "became an enormous prostitute," thereby closing the entire discussion on a note of indisputable moral finality.[78] Tertullian can make this charge seem plausible because he associates her "erroneous" teachings with penetration by evil spirits and, hence, sexual pollution.[79] This example of sexual condemnation could easily be multiplied.[80]

In the case of women who prophesied, judgment about moral character depended heavily on their conformity to established social gender roles: that meant fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, and keeping silence in church assemblies.[81] In such matters as speaking, preaching, teaching, and praying aloud before the whole community, women's sexual status was often evaluated differently from men's. The ancient sources, whether by Christians or other Mediterranean groups, often explicitly note the sexual status of women in discussing their prophetic experience, while analogous observations about men prophets are rare. Moreover, this attention consistently follows a clear pattern: When women's prophetic status is positively valued, their

sexual purity is emphasized by pointing out that they were virgins, chaste widows, or devoted wives.[82] But in cases where the writer opposes a woman, her sexual status becomes an explicit basis for condemnation.[83]

There are good warrants for supposing that at least some women prophets rejected marriage, possibly following Paul's advice that it is better not to marry, for "the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (*1 Cor* 7:34–35). It is notable that in his corresponding advice to men, Paul does not mention anything about them being "holy in body and spirit," only that they be anxious "to please the Lord" (*1 Cor* 7: 32–33). One aim of the opposition to women's public leadership apparently involved "restoring" women to their roles as wives and mothers. It is no coincidence that *1 Timothy* links its condemnation of women's public speech with a call for women to bear children in order to ensure their salvation:

> Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (*1 Tim* 2:11–15).

It is a double bind: for their prophecy to be considered authentic, women need to give up its public practice. The ambiguity and tension we witness in many of the sources—both those supporting and those opposed to public roles for women prophets—reflect the contradictions of this dilemma.

The practical consequences of this invidious criterion can be seen by again comparing Tertullian's views with those of the *Gospel of Mary*. Their differing attitudes toward the body are directly tied to valuations of the gender roles inherent in traditional Mediterranean patriarchy. For Tertullian, these are based in nature; for the *Gospel of Mary*, they are illusory. Their attitudes towards the role of women as prophets correspond to these perspectives. In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary

takes on the role of the Savior at his departure, engaging in public instruction of the other disciples. In Tertullian, a woman prophet had no right to speak during the public community gathering. Instead her visions were examined by male elders after the "people" had left. It was up to the men to determine the authenticity and truth of her revelations. Her experience might be highly valued, but her role as a public leader was not.[84]

A second criterion often employed to distinguish a true from a false prophet was whether or not the content of a prophetic message was found to be palatable—that is, whether it conformed to one's own interpretation of Scripture and tradition. The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, for example, states: "Whoever comes and teaches you all these things which have been said, receive him. But if the teacher himself is perverted and teaches another doctrine to destroy these things, do not listen to him, but if his teaching be for the increase of righteousness and knowledge of the Lord, receive him as the Lord" (*Did* 11:1). The "things" which have been taught include only basic ethical instruction, as well as information about how to practice baptism, fasting, prayer, and the eucharist; a specific rule of faith is not given. By the third century, however, Tertullian argued that the Devil sought to corrupt the orderly discipline of the church by inspiring prophecy that differed from the rule of faith.[85] It was necessary for the leaders of the congregation, therefore, to examine the prophet's words with scrupulous care in order to probe their truth.[86] This approach is very effective if you have an established rule of faith ready to hand as Tertullian did. In the early period, of course, there was no widely established consensus on the meaning of Jesus' teachings, the proper interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the practices and beliefs that ensured salvation. Or even what salvation was: was it the resurrection of the body or the ascent of the soul to God? In such a context, invoking an appeal to the true faith was more of a rhetorical move than anything else. Appealing to conformity pointed quite anxiously to the spectral absence of a normative standard against which prophecy could be measured. In effect, then, the question about the truth of prophecy takes us right into the middle of debates over the meaning of Jesus' teaching, the interpretation of scripture, community organization, and leadership.

As tradition became more fixed and authority increasingly centered in a connected, hierarchical leadership, opposition to such works as the *Gospel of Mary* would have become easier.[87] Already by the end

of the second century, Irenaeus was arguing that the testimony of the four public gospels[88] showed up the deceit of those who claimed to have received private post-resurrection teaching from Jesus before his ascent.[89] Such an argument as Irenaeus' would be persuasive only to those who accepted the four gospels as normative for Christian faith, but in his day Irenaeus could expect it to be taken seriously by many Christian groups. Even more critical, the establishment of the Nicene Creed as the rule of faith at the beginning of the fourth century provided a clear standard by which such texts as the *Gospel of Mary* would certainly be found wanting. The importance of prophecy declined as inspired teaching came more and more to be viewed merely as a supplement to the full truth already available in the normative teaching and practice of the church. But as we have repeatedly emphasized, at the time the *Gospel of Mary* was written, Christianity had no common creed, canon, or leadership structure. Attempts to distinguish true from false prophecy on the basis of content alone could only lead deeper into tangled debates about the meaning of Jesus' teachings and the location of God's guiding presence in the community.

Both the charges against Mary and Levi's defense of her belong to this early period. Andrew and Peter charge her with teachings that are "different" and challenge her authority to teach because she is a woman. There is no express attempt to denigrate her sexuality—an interesting point given the later fabrication of her as a prostitute. Levi's defense of her appeals solely to her relationship with the Savior, and the author uses the controversy with Peter solely to establish her character. Neither her detractors nor her supporters appeal to apostolic succession, to a limited canon of gospels, or a rule of faith; evidently these institutions had not yet been established.

That situation provides an important clue to dating the composition of the *Gospel of Mary*. Since the oldest surviving manuscripts, represented by the two Greek fragments, date to the early third century, the work must have been written by that time at the very latest. The only external, partially datable event referred to in the *Gospel of Mary* is the death of Jesus, which scholars generally place at about 32 CE on the basis of the claims in other gospels that Pontius Pilate ordered his execution. That sets the date of the *Gospel of Mary* sometime between 32 and 325 CE. Because no known, datable author cites the *Gospel of Mary* or mentions it by name, we cannot further narrow the date. It does appear, however, that our author was familiar with traditions found in the *Gospel of John* and perhaps the letters of Paul. If so, that

would put the gospel sometime after 90 or 100 CE. Further narrowing of the date depends upon how historians assess where its contents fit in the general history of early Christianity.

That determination is crucial, but it is also the trickiest of all the factors used in determining the date of a work because of its circularity. The dating of a work depends on how the historian constructs history, but since history is constructed from the sources, the two processes necessarily effect each other. In the case of the *Gospel of Mary*, most scholars have dated the work to the late second century because they understand its theology to be a late development of Gnosticism. But the issues it addresses and the way in which it presents those issues fit best in an early second-century context. The controversy over women's roles, the appeal to one apostle over against others, and the discussion about the meaning of Jesus' teaching, his death, and resurrection are all issues that we know were being hotly debated at this time. Because the *Gospel of Mary* defends the validity of Mary's revelation on the basis of her character, not by appeal to a fixed apostolic succession, a limited canon, or a rule of faith, it was probably written before these had been fully developed and were widely accepted. Given these factors, it would seem best to date the *Gospel of Mary* to the first half of the second century.

Although only fragments survive, they prove that the *Gospel of Mary* was circulated and read in Egypt over a period of at least three centuries, from the time of its composition in the second century until the copy made in the fifth-century Berlin Codex. Indeed, it may have been composed in Egypt, but Syria is also a possibility; we cannot be certain.

Finally, we must face the question of authorship. The work is titled after Mary; given that Mary Magdalene was a prophetic visionary and teacher, is it possible that the teachings of the *Gospel of Mary* actually come from her? I think not, primarily because it is too difficult to imagine that Mary, a Jew, could have developed teachings so removed from any basis in Jewish theological tradition. It is far more plausible that the teachings of the *Gospel of Mary* developed among Christians whose thought world was shaped by popular philosophy steeped in the ideas of Platonism and Stoicism. The gospel was ascribed to Mary in order to claim apostolic authority for its teachings, much as the other gospel literature of the first and second centuries came to be ascribed to apostles or their followers. The actual author remains unknown to us.

On the other hand, the theology of the *Gospel of Mary* may well have been informed by women's theology-making. Until its discovery, we knew of no gospel ascribed to a woman and calling upon her to guarantee the credibility and authority of the work. To be sure, early literature frequently mentioned women disciples as important interlocutors and sources of tradition. In addition to Mary Magdalene, these chiefly included Mary the mother of Jesus, Salome, Martha, and Arsinoe,[90] and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* also maintains a tradition of seven women disciples in addition to twelve male disciples as representatives of the apostolic tradition. Some scholars have even suggested that the *Gospel of Mary* was written by a woman.[91] Though we cannot know this for certain, it is plausible because women were followers of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and they continued to play important roles in early Christian groups, and we do know of women authors in antiquity.[92] Given the ubiquitous presence of women throughout Christianity, we have to assume that women as well as men passed on and interpreted Christian tradition, and that their voices as well as those of men found their places within the literary tradition of the gospels. Even if the *Gospel of Mary* was not composed by a woman, it probably does contain women's theology. I suggest this possibility primarily because of the close resonance of the *Gospel of Mary* with the theology of the Corinthian women prophets,[93] the Montanist oracles of women prophets, and Perpetua's prison diary. If we put these quite varied theologies side by side it is possible to discern shared views about teaching and practice:

> Theological reflection is centered on the experience of the person of the risen Christ more than the crucified Savior.[94] Jesus was understood primarily as a teacher and mediator of wisdom rather than as ruler or judge.
>
> Direct access to God is possible for all through the Spirit. The possession of the Spirit is available to anyone. Those who are more spiritually advanced give what they have freely to all without claim to a fixed hierarchical ordering of power. An ethics of freedom and spiritual development is emphasized over one of order and control.
>
> Identity as a Christian is constructed apart from gender roles, sex, and childbearing (with or without actually abandoning

these roles). Gender itself as a "natural" category is contested in the face of the power of God's Spirit at work in the community and the world.

The unity, power, and perfection of the Spirit are present in Christian community now, not only in some future time.

These elements may not be unique to women's religious thought or always result in women's leadership, but as a constellation they point toward one type of theologizing that was meaningful to some early Christian women, that had a place for women's legitimate exercise of prophetic leadership, and to whose construction women contributed. Focusing on these concerns enables us to discern important contributions of women to early Christian theology and practice, and to discuss some aspects of early Christian women's spiritual lives: their exercise of leadership, their ideals, their attraction to Christianity, and what gave meaning to their self-identity as Christians.

Peter's challenge represents an issue that was being hotly debated in early Christian circles: the legitimacy of women's leadership. The *Gospel of Mary* makes a forceful argument that authority and leadership roles should be based upon a person's spiritual maturity, regardless of whether that person is a man or a woman, and it affirms unambiguously that women were among the authentic followers of Jesus. We know from other sources as well that in many places women were early and important leaders in the Christian movements.[95] It is indeed impossible to understand the shrill condemnations of women's public speech found in texts like *1 Timothy* unless they were in fact prominent. We know many of their names and functions: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna, and "many others" who were immediate followers of Jesus[96]; the apostles Junia[97] and Priscilla[98]; Prisca,[99] Nympha,[100] and Lydia,[101] the heads of house churches; the deaconess Phoebe[102]; Mary,[103] a worker; and numerous women prophets, including those at Corinth,[104] Philips' daughters,[105] Ammia of Philadelphia,[106] Philumene,[107] and the visionary martyr Perpetua.[108] And surely there were many others. In the following centuries, women continued to make important contributions to Christianity in a variety of leadership roles.[109]

Yet in every century, from the first to the twenty-first, women's leadership has been opposed.[110] The attempts of some of their fellow Christians to exclude them from roles as prophets, teachers, and preachers must have been a bone of contention, even as it is today.

Yet because these opponents largely succeeded in dominating Christian theology and practice, the surviving literature gives very little information about the responses of women leaders and their supporters. Until now. The *Gospel of Mary* gives us new and precious information about how another side of the debate sounded. It argues that women's leadership is valid when based on unwavering faith, spiritual understanding, moral strength, and a commitment to further the gospel and help others—the same qualifications as those required for men's leadership. Those who oppose this kind of leadership do so out of false pride, jealousy, lack of understanding, spiritual immaturity, and contentiousness.

Mary as a woman is therefore crucial to the *Gospel of Mary*'s treatment of women's roles, but her sex-gender is also crucial to emphasizing its *theological* teaching about the body and salvation. For the *Gospel of Mary*, the body is not the true self. Even as God is nongendered, immaterial and transcendent, so too is the true human self.[111] The Savior tells his disciples that they get sick and die "because you love what deceives you" (*GMary* 3:7-8). Peter sees only that Mary is a woman, not that she is a spiritually mature disciple. He apparently "loves" the status his male sex-gender gives him, and that leads to pride and jealousy. Levi's correction of Peter helps the reader to see one of the primary ways in which people are deceived by the body: it can seem to determine a person's character and spiritual qualities.

The *Gospel of Mary* develops Mary's role as a visionary and leading female disciple for its own ends: to legitimize its interpretation of Jesus' teaching, to support its theology more generally, and to argue for leadership based on spiritual maturity—not solely on apostolic transmission and never on sex-gender distinctions, rooted as they are in the perishable world. According to the *Gospel of Mary*, merely hearing or seeing Jesus, before or after the resurrection, was not enough to ensure that the gospel was preached in truth. It was precisely the traditions of Mary as a woman, an exemplary disciple, a witness to the ministry of Jesus, a visionary of the glorified Jesus, and someone traditionally in contest with Peter, that made her the only figure who could play all the roles required to convey the messages and meaning of the *Gospel of Mary*. It was these characteristics that made her a figure around which controversy was sure to swirl.

Conclusion

When Jesus died, he did not leave behind him an established church with a clear organizational structure. The patriarchal and hier-

archical leadership of the church developed only slowly over time and out of a wide variety of possibilities. Early Christians experimented with a variety of formal arrangements, from relatively unstructured charismatic organizations to more fixed hierarchical orders. In some congregations, leadership was shared among men and women according to the movement of the Spirit in inspiring gifts of prophecy, teaching, healing, administration, and service.[112] Others were headed by elders, bishops, deacons, and widows.[113] Some had formal offices; others meted out duties according to capacity and inclination in a discipleship of equals. In many, women and slaves were important leaders; others resisted this reversal of the dominant social order and worked to exclude them. The *Gospel of Mary* was written at a time when it was not yet clear which direction church organization would take.

From at least the time of Paul, Christian churches had stressed the presence of the Spirit within the churches, and the manifestation of spiritual gifts among all believers. They assumed that Jesus intended to generate a movement that would spread his teaching to all nations. The *Gospel of Mary* traces its own spiritual legacy to the early Christian tradition that Jesus had commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel. The dialogues among the disciples are framed in order to explore the meaning of Jesus' admonition to preach the gospel. What is the content of that gospel? Who has understood it and who has the authority to preach it? What insures that the true path to salvation is being taught? The *Gospel of Mary* takes very clear positions on each of these issues, but the controversy that erupts among the disciples also shows that the author of the *Gospel of Mary* was fully aware that not all Christians agreed with its views.

Increasingly the tide would turn toward favoring a patriarchal, hierarchical authority. It was the predominant form by which power was exercised in the Roman world, and it afforded at once more stability and more respectability than charismatically organized groups, which stern Roman sensibilities apparently found radical and disorderly. In the early fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine first legalized Christianity by issuing an edict of toleration,[114] he recognized a group of male bishops as the established leadership of the church, and in doing so sanctioned a power structure that would govern Christianity for centuries to come. But Constantine only gave systematic order and imperial approval to what was largely already in place. For by the second century, bishops had begun to base their claim to be the legitimate leaders of the church on apostolic suc-

cession, claiming to trace their authority through a direct line to Jesus' immediate male followers, who were styled as the great apostolic founders of Christianity. This succession of past witnesses, it was argued, ensured the truth of the Church's teaching and guaranteed the salvation of believers.

The *Gospel of Mary* directly challenges the validity of such claims, and offers instead a vision of Christian community in which authority is based not solely or even primarily upon a succession of past witnesses, but upon understanding and appropriating the gospel. Authority is vested not in a male hierarchy, but in the leadership of men and women who have attained strength of character and spiritual maturity. Prophetic speech and visions are given a place of primacy as the manifestation of spiritual understanding and the source of sound teaching. Christian community constituted a new humanity, in the image of the true Human within, in which the superficial distinctions of the flesh lacked any spiritual significance. Women as well as men could assume leadership roles on the basis of their spiritual development. The *Gospel of Mary* rejects any view of God as divine ruler and judge and, hence, repudiates those as proper roles for Christian leadership. The true model for leadership is the Savior, the teacher and mediator of divine wisdom and salvation who cautions his disciples against laying down fixed laws and rules that will come to enslave them.

According to the master story of Christian origins, Jesus passed down the true teaching to his male disciples during his lifetime. They, as witnesses to the resurrection, were commissioned to go out and spread this teaching to the ends of the earth; and only later was that true apostolic teaching corrupted by Satan, who sowed the weeds of heresy in the apostolic fields. According to the *Gospel of Mary*, however, the weeds were sown by the apostles themselves. Men like Peter and Andrew misunderstood the Savior's teaching and sowed discord within the community. According to the master story, the full doctrine of Christianity was fixed by Jesus and passed on in the doctrines of the Church. The *Gospel of Mary* instead suggests that the story of the gospel is unfinished. Christian doctrine and practice are not fixed dogmas that one can only accept or reject; rather Christians are required to step into the story and work together to shape the meaning of the gospel in their own time. Because human passions and love of the world incline people to error, discerning the truth requires effort, and it insists that communities of faith take responsibility for

how they appropriate tradition in a world too often ruled by powers of injustice and domination.

For centuries, the master story has shaped people's imagination of the first Christian centuries; it has provided a myth of origins which casts the early Church as a place where true, uniform, and unadulterated Christianity triumphed. This story has again and again fueled the fires of reformers who appeal to it to legitimize changes in Christianity as it encountered very different conditions and cultural settings around the world. Historians, however, have come more and more to understand the *Gospel of Mary*'s portrait—despite its imaginary elaborations—as in a number of respects more historically accurate than that of the master story. The earliest Christian texts we have don't portray a harmonious and unified Church of spiritual perfection, but communities working through issues of conflict and difference. The *Gospel of Mary* also makes it quite clear that the appeal to particular kinds of apostolic authority is a theological stance, not an historical judgment. It is unlikely that twelve male disciples, each with the identical understanding of Jesus' teaching, went out and started the movements that would eventually become the religion of Christianity. We know too much about the influential activities of other figures, not least of whom are Paul, Jesus' brother James, and Mary Magdalene, to think that. The ancient texts from Egypt show that early Christians were not of one mind—even about so crucial an issue as whether the cross and physical resurrection of Jesus were important for salvation or not. The *Gospel of Mary* and other works argue energetically that the appropriation of Jesus' teachings points the way to true discipleship and salvation.

The historical importance of the *Gospel of Mary* lies in letting us see the contours of some crucial debates over the authority of apostolic tradition, prophetic experience, and women's leadership. We are in a better position to judge what was at stake in the road Christianity followed by walking a way down one of the paths that has been little trodden.

Notes

Chapter one

1. See the summary in Till and Schenke, *Die Gnostischen Schriften*, 1–2.
2. See, for example, Koester, "Writing and the Spirit"; "Written Gospels or Oral Traditions?"
3. See Markschies, "Lehrer, Schüler, Schule," 98.
4. These letters are contained in the New Testament canon, and include *Romans*, *1* and *2 Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Philippians*, *1 Thessalonians*, and *Philemon*. It is possible, although widely disputed, that Paul wrote *2 Thessalonians*, *Ephesians* and *Colossians* as well. The others letters attributed to him (*Hebrews*, *1* and *2 Timothy*, and *Titus*) are pseudonymous.
5. See *Galatians* where this issue is a topic of considerable controversy.
6. See *1 Cor* 11–14.
7. See Schmidt, "Ein vorirenaeisches gnostisches Originalwerk," 839.
8. An English translation of these works can be found in Robinson and Smith, *NHLE*.
9. Schmidt, "Ein vorirenaeisches gnostisches Originalwerk," 839.
10. See *Die alten Petrusakten*, 2.
11. Or perhaps eight? Hans-Martin Schenke has suggested that the roll from which the first pages of the Berlin codex were cut would have been a standard length if we were to reckon that two additional (uninscribed) pages had been at the beginning of the codex. See Schenke, "Bemerkungen," 315–16; Robinson, "Codicological Analysis," 40. At any rate, only six *inscribed* pages are missing; any additional pages would have been blank.
12. Schmidt clearly mentions the cover in his announcement of the find: "Das manuskript lag noch in dem Originaldeckel aus Leder und Papyrus, wie überhaupt das Ganze in einem unversehrten Zustande gefunden sein musste." ["The manuscript yet lay in the original cover made out of leather and papyrus, so that the whole must have been found in an undamaged condition."] ("Ein vorirenaeisches gnostisches Originalwerk," 839.) Nothing is said about the cover in Till's publication, however, and it seems to have been misplaced. Myriam Krutzsch and Günter Poethke, curators at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, recently found a leather cover, whose size and date fit the Berlin Codex; they have suggested this cover belongs to the Berlin Codex (see "Der Einband des koptisch-gnostischen Kodex Papyrus Berolinensis 8502").
13. This disorder may account for the fact that not only the first six pages were lost, but also four additional pages in the middle of the work (pp. 11–14). It is easy to imagine how the top pages would be removed, perhaps in hopes of an independent sale, but the reason for extracting pp. 11–14 is less clear, unless in the jumble they had come to follow p. 6. Thus whoever took the pages, took the top five leaves (ten pages).

14. "Ein vorirenaeisches gnostisches Originalwerk," 839. Because the pages were out of order, Schmidt at first mistakenly thought that *GMary* was part of another work, *ApJohn*. Once the confusion got straightened out, it became clear that *GMary* was a work in its own right.

15. Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 1.

16. Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 1.

17. Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 1.

18. Roberts, "463. The Gospel of Mary."

19. Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 24–25.

20. Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 2.

21. In 1972, Schenke published an up-dated version (see Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*). Pasquier (*L'Évangile selon Marie*) and George MacRae ("The Gospel of Mary") have offered new readings of difficult passages. See the summary of Schenke, "Carl Schmidt und der Papyrus Berolinensis 8502."

22. See Lührmann, "Die griechischen Fragmente."

23. Parsons, "3525. Gospel of Mary."

Chapter three

1. Compare *Matt* 28:16–20; *Mark* 16:14–20; *Luke* 24:44–52; *Acts* 1:6–8; *John* 20:17–18.

2. See also the discussion of Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre*, 127–60.

3. *Matt* 28:9–10, 16–20; *Mark* 16:9–20; *Luke* 24:13–53; *Acts* 1:2–9; *John* 20:11–21:23. For other post-resurrection dialogues, see Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*.

4. *Luke* 24:25–27, 32, 45–47.

5. *Matt* 28:18–20; *Mark* 16:15–18; *Luke* 24:44–49; *Acts* 1:8.

6. See Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 25–72, esp. 30–32. Perkins classifies the genre of *GMary* as a post-resurrection dialogue (see *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 25–36, 133–37).

7. See Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 21–22.

8. See Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*. The *Gospel of Mary* has also been categorized as a "discourse" (Puech and Blatz, "The Gospel of Mary," 391) and an apocalypse (see J. Collins, "Introduction"; Fallon, "The Gnostic Apocalypses"). According to Pheme Perkins, "...the revelation dialogue seems to have been as characteristic of Christian Gnostics as the Gospel was of orthodox Christians" (*The Gnostic Dialogue*, 26). Here she is following the line of argument suggested by James Robinson (Perkins cites Robinson "On the Gattung of Mark (and John)," in *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 26, n.3) and Helmut Koester that certain distinct genre of early Christian literature developed to express distinct Christological tendencies (see Koester in Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories*, 158–204). From their perspective, the narrative gospel was always based on the kerygma of the crucified and risen Lord; the sayings gospel, on the other hand, as exemplified by *GThom*, was catalyzed as a genre by "the view that the kingdom is uniquely present in Jesus' eschatological preaching and that eternal wisdom about man's true self is disclosed in his words. The gnostic proclivity of this concept needs no further elaboration" (Koester in Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories,* 186). Furthermore, according to Koester, the features of the framework of the revelation discourse, such as one sees in the *ApJohn*'s account of a luminous appearance to the disciple John, "cannot be derived from the resurrection appearances of the canonical gospels, even though a number of gnostic revelations admittedly have been influenced by the canonical Easter stories" (Koester in Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories*, 195. In his founda-

tional work, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, Koester further develops this thesis that sayings collections and dialogue gospels generally precede narrative gospels). While accepting the existence of the dialogue genre, two studies have recently criticized this general theory regarding the relationship between genre and Christology. Martina Janßen has noted the wide diversity of content, form, and function of dialogues in ancient literature, and argued that the evidence does not support tying a "gnostic" theological content to this genre ("Mystagogus Gnosticus?"). On the contrary, she suggests that the so-called "gnostic revelation dialogue" is an artificial construct that distorts interpretation, especially by over-simplification of the diversity among the texts so classified. In short, she problematizes the connection between dialogue form and heretical "gnostic" theological content. Judith Hartenstein (*Die zweite Lehre*) takes a different tack by examining the frame narratives of the revelation dialogues, isolating a sub-type of appearance dialogue. She concludes that it is the frame narrative's relating a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples that consistently marks a clear Christian element in these texts and provides a clear connection to the New Testament gospels. In short, she argues that such appearance frameworks show a dependence upon the narrative gospels, while the content of the dialogues can be quite diverse in both origin and content. It is precisely the genre of the work that gives it its Christian (as opposed to gnostic) character. Although in the end, Hartenstein supports the view that the *GMary* is a gnostic work, that is not because of the genre, but because of the content of Jesus' and Mary's teachings.

9. *GMary* 4:2, 5–7.

10. *AgHer* 5, Preface (*ANF* I, 526). All translations are adapted from this edition.

11. *AgHer* 5.1 (*ANF* I, 526; trans. adapted).

12. Irenaeus' understanding of creation and what it means to be human differs significantly from *GMary*. He argues that one does not have to leave the body in order to see God. The body is itself the locus of divine revelation and simultaneously the subject of divine salvation. It is in the body that humanity receives the Spirit and is restored to likeness to God. The presence of Spirit is not a future event; it is "dwelling in us, rendering us spiritual even now, and the mortal is swallowed up by immortality." Irenaeus assures us that this "does not take place by a casting away of the flesh, but by the importation of the Spirit" (*AgHer* 5.8 in *ANF* I, 533; adapted). For further discussion, see King, "Hearing, Seeing, and Knowing God."

13. *GMary* 4:3–5.

14. *GMary* 4:9–10.

15. A point noted in conversation. For further discussion, see below p. 56.

16. *Gal* 1:11–12.

17. *Rev* 1:1.

Chapter four

1. For further discussion, see King, *What is Gnosticism?*

2. See Wilson, "The New Testament."

3. First published in English in 1978, now in the third edition by James M. Robinson and Richard Smith.

4. Edited by Hedrick and Mirecki and published in 1999.

5. Edited by Hans-Martin Schenke and published in 2001.

6. *GMary* 10:2.

7. See *Phaedo* 64c–65d.

8. Plato uses the famous Greek word play that the body (*sóma*) is a prison (*séma*). See, for example, *Phaedrus* 250c.
9. On the nature of death, see *Phaedo* 64c.
10. See *Phaedo* 64e–65c.
11. See *Timaeus*, especially 27d–29d.
12. See *Theaetetus* 176a.
13. *Theaetetus* 176e–177a; cited from Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues*, 881.
14. *Theaetetus* 176a–c; cited from Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues*, 881.
15. *Theaetetus* 176e–177a; cited from Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues*, 881.
16. *Theaetetus* 176e–177a; cited from Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues*, 881.
17. See *Timaeus* 90e–92c.
18. See *Phaedo* 107c–d.
19. The following is based on Nussbaum, "The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions," *Apeiron* 29 (1987), 129–77, see also Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, IV.22 (in Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions*, 46–47; see also her notes, 93–94).
20. Nussbaum, "Extirpation of the Passions," 158–59.
21. For an introductory discussion of literacy, see Yaghjian, "Ancient Reading."
22. For other examples of the so-called "Platonic underground," see Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 384–96.
23. See *Mark* 4:9 and parallels. See also the forthcoming dissertation of Anne-Marit Enroth-Voitila, "'Whoever has ears, let that one hear.'" A tradition- and redaction-critical Analysis of the Hearing Formula in Early Christianity."
24. The terms "natural, molded, or created" indicate the totality of all existing material things. Compare *GPhil* 63:18–19; see Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 50; Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*, 226.
25. Compare *GPhil* 53:14–23; *OrigWorld* 127:3–5.
26. See Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 128.
27. *Academica Posteriora* I,27 (Rackham, *Cicero*, 439).
28. *1 Cor* 7:31.
29. *Mark* 13:31.
30. *2 Pet* 1:5–7.
31. *2 Pet* 1:9.
32. See *2 Pet* 2.

Chapter five

1. See also Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 53.
2. See *Phaedo* 65b; cited from Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues*, 48.
3. See *Phaedo* 65b–c. These ideas of Plato received considerable attention and elaboration in the centuries which followed. Increasingly, true knowledge came to be associated with knowledge of the immaterial realm of Being (God), and knowledge of the sensible world was disparaged as a lower concern fit only for people without higher intellectual and spiritual sensibilities. While economic and class interests are definitely at work in this formulation, the appropriation of the disparagement of matter in the *Gospel of Mary* is shaped less by upper class derogation of manual labor than by a deep sensitivity to the connection of suffering and death with the physical body.

4. See especially *Timaeus* 27d–29d.

5. Pasquier suggests that suffering arises directly from "the nature of adultery," that is, the mixing of the spiritual and material natures: "The adulterous union with matter provokes suffering because it is contrary to nature" (*L'Évangile selon Marie*, 54).

6. Compare *GPhil* 67:9–11.

7. Trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, *NHLE*, 175.

8. In arguing (correctly in my opinion) that this saying has been misinterpreted by scholars, Svartvik paraphrases his own interpretation as follows: "In other words, in reply to the questioners who complain about the disciples' breach of the tradition, Jesus rebukes them: —Why are you slandering them? Why are you insinuating that they do not keep the Law? Remember that giving vent to slander is even a graver sin than breach of your expansive interpretation of the purity laws! Indeed, *a person is defiled not so much by what goes into the mouth as by what comes out of the mouth*" (*Mark and Mission*, 409).

9. In conversation (Nashville, November, 2000).

10. Many New Testament scholars regard these verses as a later interpolation into Paul's letter, in part because of his appeal to the law and in part because the manuscript tradition is unstable here, placing these verses sometimes at *I Cor* 14:33b and sometimes after. But Wire argues to the contrary that Paul's letter has been leading up to this injunction (see *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, 152–58).

11. For the appeal to "nature" to support women's subordination, see *I Cor* 11:2–16, esp. v. 14.

12. See Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 229.

Chapter six

1. This notion may very well be connected to ancient philosophical speculation that the true nature of humanity is divine.

2. *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 62.

3. Plato clearly imagined the form of Man as a male image, not gender inclusive as does the *Gospel of Mary*.

4. *Parmenides* 130c.

5. Similar language appears in *Eph* 4:13 (εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον) and *Col* 1:28 (ἄνθρωπον τέλειον), but in both cases most English translations obscure the similarity to *GMary* by translating "perfect" as "mature" (see, for example, NRSV).

6. Schröter sees this application of the phrase "Son of Man" to humanity not just to Jesus, as a "democratizing" of the concept (see "Zur Menschensohnvorstellung," 186–87).

7. This inclusive translation should not obscure the fact that the usage of the masculine to refer to humanity as a whole is not accidental or incidental. This usage clearly reflects the values of Mediterranean culture, where the male represents what is perfect, powerful, and transcendent (see for example Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4:15: "The soul has, as it were, a dwelling partly in men's quarters, partly women's quarters. Now for the men there is a place where properly dwell the masculine thoughts (that are) wise, sound, just, prudent, pious, filled with freedom and boldness, and akin to wisdom. And the women's quarters are a place where womanly opinions go about and dwell, being followers of the female sex. And the female sex is irrational and akin to the bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure, and desire, from which ensue incurable weaknesses and indescribable diseases" (trans. Marcus; *Philo Supplement* 1, 288).

Chapter seven

1. The Greek version reads: "*Once* when the Lord appeared to me in a vision," implying that he may have appeared on more than one occasion.

2. See Williams, *The Immovable Race.*

3. Variations of this saying are also attested in Clement of Alexandria (*Who is the Rich Man who will be Saved?* 17:1; *Stromateis* IV,6:33), Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 6:2), Macarius (*Homily* 43:3), and others.

4. See *Matt* 6:21; *Luke* 12:34.

5. For a fuller exposition of this issue, see King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority."

6. In taking this position, Tertullian is close to the Stoics who regarded the soul as material.

7. Some manuscripts read "Paul" instead of "people" (see Waszink, *Tertulliani,* text, p. 12, note 15).

8. See, for example, *De anima* 36.4 where he states that Eve's soul was more complete than Adam's.

9. This view is shared by many Platonists of this period. For example, in *The Face on the Moon*, one of Plutarch's characters argues that a human being is tripartite: body, soul, and mind. The body derives from the earth, the soul from the moon, and the mind from the sun. At death, in various stages, each returns to that from which it came (*On the Face of the Moon* 28). Plutarch writes: "Most people rightly hold a person to be composite, but wrongly hold him to be composed of only two parts. The reason is that they suppose mind to be somehow part of soul, thus erring no less than those who believe soul to be part of body, for in the same degree as soul is superior to body, so is mind better and more divine than soul. The result of soul and body commingled is the irrational or the effective factor, whereas of mind and soul the conjunction produces reason; and of these the former is the source of pleasure and pain, the latter of virtue and vice" (*On the Face of the Moon* 28; trans. Cherniss and Helmbold, 197).

10. See *De anima* 40.

11. Here Tertullian departs from the views of Soranus and the Stoics. He argues strongly against their views on the fate of the soul after death and that sense perception is fallible. He also argues against the Platonic views on metempsychosis since they endanger his view that the flesh is resurrected.

12. See *De anima* 41.3–4.

13. See *De anima* 41.4

14. Text in Waszink, *Tertulliani*, 62. Compare Cicero: "When, therefore, the soul has been withdrawn by sleep from contact with sensual ties, then does it recall the past, comprehend the present, and foresee the future. For though the sleeping body then lies as if it were dead, yet the soul is alive and strong, and will be much more so after death when it is wholly free of the body" (*De divinatione* I.30.63 in Falconer, *Cicero*, 295). This perspective is actually closer to that of *GMary* than to Tertullian insofar as it presupposes that the soul is permanently separated from the body at death. For a fuller discussion of Tertullian on ecstasy, see Nasrallah, "'An Ecstasy of Folly.'"

15. *De anima* 47. Compare Cicero on the views of Posidonius, *De divinatione*, I, 30 (64).

16. See *De anima* 6:3.

17. Text and trans. in Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 68, 69, with modification; I

have changed the pronouns in this translation from the masculine used by Tertullian to plural pronouns since Tertullian clearly believes that both men and women are capable of prophecy; see *De anima* 9:4. See also the study of Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testamonia*, which includes important attestations to women leaders among the Montanists. For discussion of the Montanist women prophets and office-holders, see Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters*, 133–82; Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity.*

18. And among non-Christians; see, for example, Cicero, *De divinatione* I.30.63.

19. Justin here presupposes a tripartite division of body, soul, and spirit. The mind, it would seem, is the ruling portion of the soul. He holds with Tertullian in arguing that the body itself will be saved (see Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*), but not due to its own nature. It was created and therefore exists only because of God's will (see *Dialogue with Trypho* 5). The soul itself is neither immortal nor unbegotten, unlike the spirit which animates it (*Dialogue with Trypho* 6). In this schema, reason is essential to knowledge of God and to obtaining salvation by the exercise of one's God-given capacity for free will (see *Dialogue with Trypho* 141).

20. Cited by Tardieu, *L'Écrit gnostiques*, 232.

21. "'Blessed are you for not wavering at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure'" (*GMary* 7:3–4).

22. Compare Seneca (*Natural Questions* I, pref. 11–13), who considers the mind to be the divine part of humanity, but says it can roam the divine heavens only when it "retains very little of the body, only if it has worn away all sordidness and, unencumbered and light, flashes forth, satisfied with little. When the mind contacts those regions it is nurtured, grows, and returns to its origin just as though freed from its chains. As proof of its divinity it has this: divine things cause it pleasure, and it dwells among them not as being alien things but things of its own nature. Serenely it looks upon the rising and setting of the stars and the diverse orbits of bodies precisely balanced with one another . . . Here, finally, the mind learns what it long sought: here it begins to know god" (trans. Corcoran, *Seneca*).

Chapter eight

1. This speculation is based on the fact that Darkness is the first of the seven Powers of Wrath.

2. The word eternal is not quite correct here, since the *Gospel of Mary* understands the final resting place of the soul to be beyond time and eternity.

3. As Pasquier points out, three terms structure the dialogue of the third Power with the soul: ignorance, domination, and judgment. These three form the basis of the Power's illegitimate domination over entrapped souls. See Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 89–92.

4. See Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 80–83; Michel Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 290–92. Concerning the origin of their names, see Pasquier, 80–86; Tardieu, 234.

5. The Greek and Coptic texts show minor variation in sense here. The Greek reads: "the [due] measure of the time of the aeon" (PRyl), while the Coptic reads: "the time of the due measure of the aeon" (BG).

6. Compare *DSav* 141:3–9.

7. Published by Louis Robert, "Trois oracles de la Théosophie et unprophètie d'Apollon" (cited from MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 13).

8. See, for example, the discussion of Culianu, "Ascension"; Colpe, "Jenseits

(Jenseitsvorstellungen)"; "Jenseitsfahrt I (Himmelfahrt)"; "Jenseitsreise (Reise durch das Jenseits"); Casadio, "Gnostische Wege zur Unsterblichkeit"; A. Y. Collins, "The Seven Heavens"; Segal, "Heavenly Ascent."

9. See, for example, *1 Enoch* 70–71.

10. An especially rich source of such material is found in the *Books of Jeu*, especially book 2, and *The Chaldaean Oracles.*

11. Koester and Pagels have suggested that the rise of the soul at the beginning of *DSav* presupposes a baptismal setting (see *NHLE*, 245).

12. See especially *Zostrianos*, *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Allogenes.*

13. See, for example, the theurgic rites implied by the Chaldean Oracles (see Ruth Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles).*

14. Trans. W. Scott, *Hermetica*, 129 (modified).

15. In addition to *ApocPaul*, see, for example, *DSav* 120:1–124:22; *Three Steles of Seth*; *Allogenes*; *Zostrianos*; *2 Apocryphon of James* 32:28–36:13; Irenaeus, *AgHer* 1.21:5; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.13:2; 36.3:1–6; *PiSo* 286:9–291:23.

16. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 198–99. My emphasis in the last paragraph.

17. J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 124.

18. Cited in J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 124.

19. See J. Scott's discussion, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 103–7.

20. See also the discussion of Wink, *Cracking the Gnostic Code*, which does not treat the *Gospel of Mary* but does consider how the Powers may have been understood in antiquity in terms of social criticism.

Chapter nine

1. The Coptic here reads ϩⲏⲧ ("heart") while the Greek reads *νοῦς* ("mind").

2. Schenke suggests that the Coptic term for "greet" might also have included a kiss of greeting (see Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 338; also Mohri, *Maria Magdalena*, 262).

3. I use the term "apostle" here (a term which does not appear in the work itself) to refer to those who received the commission from the Savior to go forth and preach. It is basically synonymous with "disciple" since *GMary* does not distinguish between the two, and indeed neither term appears in the work at all to describe the Savior's dialogue partners. All those who receive teaching are also given the commission to preach. There is no evidence here of a special group like "the twelve."

4. Indeed the seeming contradiction between Peter's affectionate request and his challenging response have led some scholars to suggest that the text has been secondarily edited (see the summary of Mohri, *Maria Magdalena*, 266–67).

5. This supposition is based not merely on the expression of conflict within the text's dialogue, but on widespread external evidence from other sources that the issues raised here were widely under debate in this period. See, for example, Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 73.

6. I am thinking here of the philosopher Hypatia who was murdered by Christians; and Philomene may be a Christian example as well (see the discussion of Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters*, 194–222).

7. See *AgHer* 3.3:1

8. See *AgHer* 3.2:1.

9. In the *Gospel of Mary*, this self is referred to as "the child of true Humanity" or "the perfect Human."

10. This position is developed further in King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority."

Chapter ten

1. A post-resurrection dialogue setting is also widely attested outside the canonical materials in second and third century tradition, for example in *ApJohn, BkThom, SoJsChr, 1ApocJas*, or *ApocPet*. For a full discussion, see Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*. There are important other dialogues as well, although without a post-resurrection setting, for example, *DSav*. The latter is especially important as a generic parallel to *GMary*, for it contains not only dialogue but also a reference to the ascent of the soul.

2. A famous account of the early research on the historical Jesus may be found in Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

3. For a fuller history of New Testament gospel scholarship, see Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*.

4. Koester, "Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?" 297.

5. Irenaeus, *AgHer* 3.2.1, citing *1 Cor* 2:6.

6. These changes can be readily seen by comparing the texts side by side (see Funk, *New Gospel Parallels*). In addition, the authors of *Matthew* and *Luke* also drew upon another (lost) collection of Jesus materials that scholars have dubbed *Q* (from the German term "Quelle," which means "source"). A reconstruction of this lost work can be found in Miller, *The Complete Gospels* or Kloppenborg, *Q Parallels*. To learn more about *Q*, see Mack, *The Lost Gospel*.

7. Sometimes changes were made to clarify shifts in theology (see examples in Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*).

8. Wilson, "The New Testament," 242.

9. Wilson, "The New Testament," 240.

10. See the discussion of Vorster, "The Protevangelium of James and Intertextuality," 268–69.

11. Although the gospels of *Mark* and *Luke* are not ascribed to one of the known apostles, later tradition claims that Peter was the ultimate source of *Mark* (Papias, cited in Eusebius, *HistEccl* 3.39.15), and Luke is associated with Paul (see *2 Tim* 4:11). Several New Testament letters ascribed to Paul are considered to be pseudonymous (e.g., *Hebrews*, *1* and *2 Timothy*, *Titus*).

12. So, too, they may have made associations unknown to us, whether to unfamiliar literary works or oral traditions and practices.

13. Wilson, "The New Testament," 239; Schröter sees no literary dependence of this passage on the New Testament gospels, but rather suggests that the situation of the farewell is common and presupposed by the *Gospel of Mary* ("Zur Menschensohnvorstellung," 181, n. 6).

14. This passage appears only in some manuscripts (see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 160).

15. Examples can be found in *1 Pet* 5:14; *Rom* 1:7; *1 Cor* 1:3.

16. The only exception to the post-resurrection setting is one occurrence (out of four) in the *Gospel of John* during the farewell discourse of Jesus to his disciples before his death (*John* 14:27).

17. Because of the unusual use of "my," historical critical approaches have taken Jesus' greeting in *John* 14:27 to be a direct literary parallel to the second saying in the *Gospel of Mary*, "Acquire my peace within yourselves!" But they don't explain why the *Gospel of Mary* would cite the *Gospel of John* or what effect that intertextual reference might have had on readers (see Wilson and MacRae, "The Gospel of Mary," 458; Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 57). Tardieu calls it a "johannisme," and comments: "*Paix* désigne ici la dimension intérieure du salut" (*Écrits gnostiques*, 228).

18. See Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*, 32–33.

19. The admonition to follow may also point toward the soul's journey described later by Mary, but in the extant text there is no indication that the soul is meant to follow the path of the Savior in the ascent.

20. *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 186.

21. See also a version of the "seek and find" aphorism in *DSav* 126:6–17; 129:14–16, and the discussion of Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 176–77.

22. Koester lists the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, and *Apocryphon of James* as examples of this kind of Christology (see *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 263–67); to these we may add the *Gospel of Mary*.

23. *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 264–65; see also the discussion of DeConick, *Seek to See Him*.

24. See Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 62.

25. Cf. *Mark* 8:35; *John* 12:25, 15:20.

26. Although not a quotation from Jesus, this treatment of the disciples' fear of death thematically reflects Jesus' admonition not to fear those who can kill the body, but those who can harm the soul (*Q* 12:4–7; *Luke* 12:4–7; *Matt* 10:28).

27. *AgHer* 3.1.1 (*ANF*, 414).

28. This is no doubt due in part to the designation of the text as late (that is, not of value for the historical Jesus or the origins of Christianity), derivative (that is, dependent upon the New Testament), and "Gnostic" (that is, heretical). Indeed the first author to devote a study to the question of the relationship of the *Gospel of Mary* to canonical texts considered its Christian character itself to be a question, devoting four pages (out of eight) to the question of whether or not the underlying base text was non-Christian (see Wilson, "The New Testament," esp. 237–40).

29. See "The Gospel of Mary" (in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*) and "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene" (in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*).

30. "How," Koester asks, "can we know when written documents are the source for such quotation and allusions?" The answer he gives is redaction criticism: "Whenever one observes words or phrases that derive from the author or redactor of a gospel writing, the existence of a written source must be assumed" (Koester, "Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?" 297).

31. It may also be noted that some scholars continue to pursue aspects of source criticism under the rubric of intertextuality. A case in point is the work of Dennis MacDonald in *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. There he offers criteria of "accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability" to determine whether the author of the *Gospel of Mark* intentionally alluded to Homeric epic. The criterion of accessibility assesses whether the author had access to the source; analogy asks whether other works are imitating this same model; density determines the volume of the parallels between two works; distinctiveness notes rarities that are "flags for readers to compare the imitating texts with their models"; and interpretability refers to whether knowing a source helps the reader make sense of the text (8–9). Where MacDonald's work moves from source criticism to intertextuality lies in considering intelligibility from the reader's perspective, and in inquiring about the function of such intertextuality (in this case, suggesting that the author of *Mark* used allusions to Homer in order to present Jesus as superior to the ancient Homeric heroes). This issue of function is sometimes considered through another historical-critical method, redaction criticism, which considers how an editor has changed his sources in order to express his own theological tendencies. That MacDonald retains many of the assumptions of historical critical methods is demonstrated in his conclusions: that "the primary

cultural context of the Gospel (is) in Greek religious tradition, not in Judaism" and that dependence upon classical poetry undermines the historical veracity of many scenes in the *Gospel of Mark* (189–90). My use of intertextuality in contrast would suggest that history is always interpreted out of the cultural resources at hand; questions of fact and fiction are not settled by intertextual reference. As Kristeva famously puts it, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotation; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (*Desire in Language*, 66).

32. Koester, "Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?" 297.

33. See Crossan, *In Fragments*, 37–54.

34. This passage appears only in some manuscripts (see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament,* 160).

Chapter eleven

1. *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 14–17.
2. *Rom* 1:18–32.
3. See Johnson Hodge, "'If Sons, Then Heirs.'"
4. *Rom* 7:4–6.
5. *Gal* 2:16.
6. Another case of possible misunderstanding is found in *DSav* 135:16–136:5 where, as result of Jesus' teaching, the disciples "concluded that it is useless to regard wickedness." That this statement does not dismiss evil is shown by an interchange between Judas and Jesus that follows later in the work: "[Judas] said, 'Tell me, Lord, what the beginning of the path is.' He said, 'Love and goodness. For if one of these existed among the governors, wickedness would never have come into existence'" (*NHLE*, 73–74).
7. For Paul, see *Gal* 5:16–26.
8. This discussion of ethics relies upon the superbly thoughtful work of O'Connor, "On Doing Religious Ethics."
9. A modified quote from John Cobb, cited in O'Connor, "On Doing Religious Ethics," 85.
10. *The Gnostic Gospels*, esp. 70–101.
11. See, for example, *Acts* 8:3 which explicitly states that both men and women were being put in prison.
12. Cited from *NHLE*, 436, with modifications.

Chapter twelve

1. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 184, 236,
2. Comments made in discussion at the Universal Truth Center Women's Retreat, October, 2000.
3. So, for example, Origen, an early third century theologian from Alexandria in Egypt, works hard to dispel this impression (*Commentary on John* 6.37; 10.21); see also Irenaeus, *AgHer* 5.31.
4. *Eumenides* 103 and *Aeneid* 6.450–58. See De Conick, "Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen," 392–393.
5. See Hock, "Homer in Greco-Roman Education."
6. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 681–97, esp. 688.

Chapter thirteen

1. The references follow the only published edition of this work, by Hedrick and Mirecki, *The Gospel of the Savior*, even though Emmel has recently suggested a reordering of the pages of this work ("The Recently Published Gospel of the Savior").

2. For more on Andrew, see Peterson, *Andrew*; MacDonald, "Andrew (person)."

3. The best treatment of Peter is by Perkins, *Peter*; see also Brown et al., *Peter in the New Testament*; Donfried, "Peter (person)"; Grappe, *Image de Pierre*.

4. Cephas (the underlying Aramaic means "stone"); Peter (a Greek name derived from *petros*, meaning "stone"); Simon was probably his given Hebrew name.

5. Notably Perkins, *Peter*, 156–59, an otherwise excellent study of the early traditions about Peter.

6. The Revised Standard Version diplomatically translates the Greek *hypokrisei* as "insincerity" instead of "hypocrisy."

7. See the discussion of Kessler, *Peter as the First Witness*.

8. Donfried offers numerous examples of *Luke*'s rehabilitation of Peter (see *ABD* V, 258–59).

9. See Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 393–401.

10. See *NHLE*, 431–37.

11. See *NHLE*, 372–78.

12. See Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, II, 34–41.

13. See Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, II, 271–321. See also the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* (*NHLE*, 287–94) and the *Act of Peter* from the Berlin Codex (*NHLE*, 528–31).

14. See *AgHer* 3.13.2: "How could Peter, to whom the Lord gave the testimony that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him but heaven, have been in ignorance?" referring to *Matt* 16:17.

15. See the discussion of Kessler, *Peter as the First Witness*, 197–207; Perkins, *Peter*, 168–81.

16. See especially Ricci, *Mary Magdalene*, 51–161; De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 18–57; Collins, "Mary (person)"; D'Angelo, "Reconstructing 'Real' Women"; Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 204–99.

17. See Schaberg's account of visiting the present location in "Thinking Back through the Magdalene" and a revised version in *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 47–63. See also Strange, "Magdala"; De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 21–31, who traces the history of the city to understand Mary's background; and Ricci, *Mary Magdalene*, 130–31.

18. See *Mark* 15:40–41; *Matt* 27:55–56; *Luke* 8:1–3; *John* 19:25; *GPhil* 59:6–9(?).

19. *Mark* 15:40–41; *John* 19:25. She was also said to be present at the entombment in *Mark* 15:47 and *Matt* 27:61.

20. The presence of women at the tomb, and indeed the entire empty tomb story, has been questioned by modern scholars (see e.g., Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 354–416; *The Birth of Christianity*, 550–62). The Jesus Seminar found it plausible that women witnessed the crucifixion (see Funk, *The Acts of Jesus*, 157–158, 264, 362–63, 437–39). Schaberg argues that it is plausible that Mary Magdalene did indeed observe the crucifixion and followed to see where Jesus' body was buried (see *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 276–91).

21. *Mark* 16:1–8; *Matt* 28:1–7; *Luke* 24:1–10; *John* 20:1, 11–13. *GPet* 12:50–13:57 also gives Mary of Magdala a preeminent place as the first witness to the empty tomb, although the material about Mary may be a secondary addition (see Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke*, 285–86; see Schaberg's critique, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 238–53). The Jesus Seminar holds that "Mary was among the early witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus" (Funk, *The Acts of Jesus*, 479).

22. See Milburn, *Early Christian Art*, 12; Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 58–63.

23. For example, *Mark* 15:40–41, 47; 16:1; *Matt* 27:55–56, 61; 28:1; *Luke* 8:1–3; 24:10; *GPet* 12:50–51; *Manichaean Psalmbook* 192:21–22 and 194:19; but not *John* 19:25 or the *1ApJas* 40:25–26

24. *GThom; GMary; SoJsChr; DSav; PiSo.*

25. *Matt* 28:9–10; *John* 20:14–18; *Mark* 16:9; *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.3.14.

26. *John* 20:17. In *Mark* 16:7 and *Matt* 28:7, angels commission Mary and the other women to carry the news of the resurrection.

27. See Schüssler Fiorenza, "Apostle to the Apostles."

28. So, for example, Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus*, 479. Schaberg appropriately criticizes my summary there as giving too little emphasis to the controversy over how to portray Mary already present in the gospels (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 234–38). I hope that the treatment of the controversy between Mary and Peter that follows in my discussion here will have rectified that deficiency.

29. *Mark* 16:9 is generally considered to be dependent upon the Lukan account, and hence it does not provide independent evidence.

30. It was interpreted this way by *Mark* 16:9.

31. See *Luke* 8:1–3; see also Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 14. Schaberg concludes: "Schottroff is right, in my opinion, to judge that Luke's 'idea that wealthy women were close to Jesus does not originate from otherwise lost traditions of the Jesus movement but from later experiences of the young church in the cities of the Roman Empire outside Palestine, which Luke projects back into Jesus' time' (see *Acts* 16:14–15; 17:4, 12)" (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 265).

32. Other examples include Luke's larger program to restrict the apostolic mission to men, for example in limiting the selection of a replacement for Judas to men (*Acts* 1:15–26). Even when women appear in powerful roles, as Priscilla (*Acts* 18:18, 26) or the daughters of Philip who prophesy (*Acts* 21:9), they always appear with husbands and fathers.

33. Ricci (*Mary Magdalene*, 41) notes that this patronage has often been interpreted in terms of women's enabling function; she cites R. P. Baden, for example, "who, to define the role of the women, observes that while the Lord 'did not want women to preach his doctrine... (since) the fragility of their nature and the modesty of their sex' would not allow this, he nevertheless left them to take care of the men's material needs in order to leave them free to proclaim the good news." Schaberg suggests that this tradition is not historical, citing Luise Schottroff: "While the women's 'service' may have originally indicated a powerful leadership position, it is most often read as casting them in the roles of financial supporters or servants caring for the physical needs of the men, confining them in private rather than public roles" (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 265).

34. The portraits of Mary Magdalene in this literature are thoroughly discussed and evaluated in Bovon, "Mary Magdalene's Pascal Privilege" and Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*; see also Schmid, *Maria Magdalena*; and the judicious study of Mohri, *Marie Magdalena.*

35. For the story of the find, see Robinson, "From Cliff to Cairo."

36. For an English translation of these works, see *NHLE.*

37. This codex was purchased in 1772 by A. Askew, the London physician after whom it was named (Codex Askewianus). Its date of discovery and specific provenance are unknown. The Coptic text and English translation may be found in Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia.*

38. Additional material on Mary is found in the *Manichaean Psalmbook* (see Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?"; Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved,*

203–15), but these works belong to the religion of Manichaeism and will not be discussed here.

39. *1ApJas* 40:22–26.

40. See *DSav* 126:17; 131:19; 134:25 (?); 134:25; 137:3; 139:8; 140:14, 19, 23; 141:12; 142:20; 143:6; 144:5, 22; 146:1.

41. There should be no surprise that a tradition developed about a group of women disciples, given the testimony of the gospels (see *Mark* 15:40–41; *Matt* 27:55–56; *Luke* 8:1–3; 23:49, 55; 24:10). Ricci concludes that *Luke* 8:1–3 "provides the information that a group of women followed Jesus constantly on his traveling since the beginning of his public activity in the land of Galilee. A circle of women: Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Susanna and many others; they set out with him, leaving home, family, relations, their village, their everyday life, and stayed with him, listening, speaking, traveling, offering goods and services, living with him, in short, and in the end followed him to the cross, where they, the only faithful witnesses, were to see him die" (*Mary Magdalene*, 53).

42. *SoJsChrNHC* III 98:10; 114:9; BG 90:1; 117:13.

43. In addition to Mary Magdalene, Jesus' mother also appears in these works (see Brock, "Setting the Record Straight.")

44. *PiSo* 26:17–20; see also 199:20–200:3; 232:26–233:2; 328:18–19; 339:8–9.

45. *PiSo* 218:10–219:2.

46. Some have suggested emending the text to read "his sister" instead of "her sister."

47. This grouping is similar to the list of women at the foot of the cross in *John* 19:25: "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."

48. Scholars are divided over how to understand the phrase that Mary is his sister, his mother, and his companion. Some read it to say merely that Mary Magdalene was one of three Marys who accompanied Jesus, while others see the three as one figure (see the discussion of Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 160, including nn. 57 and 58). Marjanen concludes, "She is to be seen as a mythical figure who actually belongs to the transcendent realm but who manifests herself in the women accompanying the earthly Jesus" (161). The syntax of the Coptic seems to support the latter view, as does the general theological tendency of *GPhil*.

49. *GPhil* 67.9–12; Layton and Isenberg, "The Gospel of Philip," 174–75.

50. Alternatively, lines 63:30–34 could be reconstructed to read: "Wisdom, who is called 'the barren,' is the mother [of an]gels and [the] companion of the s[avior, Ma]ria the Mag[da]lene" (see Layton and Isenberg, "*Gospel According to Philip*," 166–67). In this case, the text would identify Sophia (Wisdom) with Mary Magdalene as the companion of the Savior. Schenke has argued persuasively against this reading, however, by noting that even though Sophia becomes the heavenly companion of the Savior, Sophia is barren because she is the mother of the archontic rulers of the lower world. Nonetheless, he notes that when this passage about Wisdom is read next to the passage where Jesus kisses Mary Magdalene, it allows the reading that Mary Magdalene is the heavenly syzygos (companion) of the Savior (see Schenke, *Das Phillipus-evangelium*, 336). As Layton and Isenberg note (op. cit. 166–67), the lacuna in line 63:36 where the Savior kisses Mary can also be restored in various ways: "on her mouth" or "her feet" or "her cheek" or "her forehead." The reading "mouth" is preferred here because of the reference to kissing on the mouth found at *GPhil* 58:34–59:4; the other readings, however, are also possible.

51. See *The Woman Jesus Loved*, esp. 189–90.

52. *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 189–190. In cases like these, Marjanen argues that the mere presence of Mary is not meant to engage the general question of women's leadership. In contrast, see Petersen, *'Zerstört die Werke der Wieblichkeit!'*.

53. Brock, "Mary Sees and Reveals."

54. See Meyer, "Making Mary Male" and "Gospel of Thomas Logion 114 Revisited"; Buckley, "An Interpretation of Logion 114"; McGuire, "Women, Gender and Gnosis."

55. See Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male'."

56. *PiSo* 201:21–25; 296:10–12.

57. *GMary* 10:15. Mary's name appears repeatedly; see *GMary* 5:4, 9; 6:1, 3; 9:30; 10:5.

58. From the first publication of the Berlin manuscript by Till, the assumption has been that the Mary of *GMary* is Mary Magdalene (see Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 26; also Pasquier, *L'Évangile selon Marie*, 6; Bovon, "Mary Magdalene's Pascal Privilege," 147–57; Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*, 20, 225; Schmid, *Maria Magdalena*, 93 n.9, 101 n. 29; Atwood, *Mary Magdalene*, 186–96; De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 81; Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 94–95, n. 2; Petersen, *'Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!'*, 94; Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 126–27; et al. This conclusion has been questioned by Lucchesi ("Évangile selon Marie") and especially Shoemaker ("A Case of Mistaken Identity?"), who argue that the figure of Mary is better understood as Jesus' mother. Rebuttals to these positions are found in Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 94–95 n. 2; Marjanen, "The Mother of Jesus or the Magdalene?"; and King, "Why all the Controversy?" Much of the discussion has centered around the portrayal of Mary in a later work, called *Pistis Sophia*, rather than in *GMary* (see especially Schmidt, *Gnostischen Schriften*, 453–54, 597; Shoemaker, "Rethinking the Gnostic Mary"; and see especially the excellent discussion of Brock, "Setting the Record Straight"). The discussion focuses around three main issues: 1) the form of the name; 2) the relationship to portrayals of the Marys in the New Testament gospels; and 3) the portrayal of gender (see especially Petersen '*Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit*,' 104). Based on these three points, I would argue that the portrait of Mary in *GMary* is more closely allied to the historical Mary Magdalene than to Jesus' mother or to the sister of Martha (see "Why all the Controversy?").

The scholarly discussion has been very useful, however, for pointing out the tendency of the tradition toward conflating the various Mary figures, a fact that should incline us to see these Marys as literary portraits, not historical figures. In every case, the first question is not "which Mary?" but "How is Mary being portrayed, what roles is she given, and what issues are at stake?" In the end, Western tradition distinguishes between Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother based largely on the portrayal of their sexuality: the repentant whore and the virgin mother—although in the end, both are used to promote the tradition of celibacy.

59. See Schaberg, "How Mary Magdalene became a Whore." This fact has long been recognized by Western scholars (see the overview of research in Ricci, *Mary Magdalene*, 30–40; De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 9–16), and Eastern tradition never portrayed Mary Magdalene as a prostitute.

60. For the story of her later mythic and legendary exploits, including those as a preacher and teacher, see Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth*; Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*; Jansen, "Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*."

61. See Corley, "'Noli me tangere'"; Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, 58–67, 90.

Price has argued that the tendency to diminish Mary's role as the first, and perhaps only, witness is already evidenced in the New Testament gospels and Paul (see "Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?").

62. See, for example, Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.70.

63. See Tertullian, *De Anima* 25.8. He uses the report that Mary was possessed by seven demons to support his view (that a child possesses soul from the moment of conception) by showing that it is possible for one person to have two souls (that is, the soul of the mother and the soul of the child).

64. See, for example, Irenaeus, *AgHer* 5.31; Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.37; 10.21.

65. See Robinson, "Jesus from Easter to Valentinus."

66. *Against Praxeas* 25.

67. See Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.37; 10.21.

68. For example, Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith*, 4.2; Jerome, *To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem* 35; Jerome, *To Marcella* 59.4; Augustine, *Sermon* 244.3.

69. Ambrose (see Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, 93).

70. Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.70.

71. Price has suggested that this strategy was already intended by the gospel authors of *Matthew* and *Luke*. Moreover, he suggests that all four of the gospels diminish her prominence by making the appearance to her only one of a series (see "Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?").

72. For two alternative readings, see Trible, "A Love Story Gone Awry," and King, "*The Book of Norea*."

73. See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 3.10; Augustine, *Sermon* 232.2.

74. See Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit* 3.11.

75. Or those in the *DSav*, *SoJsChr*, or *PiSo*.

76. The Eastern churches never made this error, and therefore never developed a portrait of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. She is honored as an important witness to the resurrection.

77. See Lagrange, "Jésus a-t-il été oint plusieurs fois et par plusieurs femmes?"; Holzmeister, "Die Magdalenenfrage."

78. Gregory, *Homily* 33 (quoted from Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 96).

79. *John* 19:25.

80. *Mark* 15:40, 47.

81. *Matt* 27:56.

82. *Matt* 27:61; 28:1.

83. See Hippolytus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*; and the discussion of Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 63–67.

84. Most recently of course it was popularized in the opera "Jesus Christ Superstar," and in the suggestion of marriage that appeared in Jesus' dream life in the film "The Last Temptation of Christ." This supposedly scandalous movie simply repeats in cinematic form the pervasive and completely unoriginal theme of Western Christianity that female sexuality is the greatest temptation men have to overcome (or control). But, as the reaction to "The Last Temptation" shows, any portrayal of Jesus as a fully human sexual person is still capable of arousing a good deal of critical public response.

85. A point brought home to me by Robert Funk in conversation.

86. See, for example, Jansen, "Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*."

87. There are cases in the Medieval period when these two portraits were combined. See Jansen, "Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*."

Chapter fourteen

1. For a more detailed elaboration of the position given in the paragraph, see King, *What is Gnosticism?* esp. 1–54.
2. I put the term Judaism in quote marks here to signal an acknowledgement of the gap between the Christian construction of "Judaism" and an historical description of Jewish beliefs and practices. For more on this issue, see King, *What is Gnosticism?* 40–47.
3. Some specialists are now beginning to restrict the term Gnosticism to one group: Sethians (see King, *What is Gnosticism?* chapter 6). The *Gospel of Mary* does not belong to this group.
4. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, xxiii.
5. Cf. *Matt* 5:17–18
6. *Gal* 2:16
7. It is important to note, too, that the creed was never intended to be a full statement of Christian belief. Rather it was formulated as a hedge against heresy. For every affirmation of the creed, there was at least one corresponding alternative perspective that the bishops wanted to refute.
8. *GThom* 1.
9. *GThom* 3.
10. *Prov* 8:22–31; *Ecclesiasticus* 1:4.
11. *Wis* 7:25–28; *Prov* 8:32–36.
12. *Prov* 1:20–22; 8:1–11.
13. *Wis* 10:1 ff.
14. *Prov* 1:20–33.
15. *Job* 28:21–28.
16. *GThom* 28, 38.
17. *GThom* 77.
18. *GThom* 108.
19. *GThom* 5, 6, 17, 18.
20. Some scholars dispute whether Valentinus wrote the *Gospel of Truth*, at least in its current form (see Mortley, "The Name of the Father"), but most agree that he is the author (see the arguments of van Unnik, "The 'Gospel of Truth' and the New Testament"; Wilson, "Valentinianism and the Gospel of Truth," 133–41).
21. *GTruth* 18:2–11.
22. *GTruth* 18:11–21.
23. *GTruth* 19:18–27.
24. *GTruth* 18:21–31.
25. *GTruth* 20:12–21:2.
26. See *GTruth* 23:18–24:9.
27. *GTruth* 24:9–27:7.
28. *GThom* 27:2–30:16.
29. *GTruth* 30:16–33:32.
30. *GTruth* 42:4–10.
31. *GTruth* 40:23–43:24.
32. See *Rom* 6:1–11.
33. See Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 26–32.

34. Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 136, 141. She suggested that "the picture of Mary in *Gospel of Mary* was formulated in association with a Gnostic sayings tradition" (135).

35. See, for example, Pasquier, *L'Evangile selon Marie*, 5–7; Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 137.

36. Petersen, *'Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!'*, 60–61. She determines the *Gospel of Mary* to have non-Christian, gnostic content, primarily by: 1) marking out "typical Gnostic themes" (e.g., the rise of the soul as release from matter; the contrast between the inner and the outer, so that peace and salvation come from within a person and not from without; the Son of Man is not the judge of the end-time, but the true Human in humanity), and 2) comparison with the New Testament.

37. See Wilson, "The New Testament," 240.

38. Attempts by scholars to characterize the essential features of Gnosticism, such as we see for example in the now-classic work of Hans Jonas ("Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon"; *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*; *The Gnostic Religion*), are less self-evident than they used to be, given the variety of the literature from the Egyptian discoveries. Already in 1961, Carsten Colpe had shown that "the gnostic redeemer myth" was itself an artificial and inaccurate scholarly construction (*Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*). More recently, Michael Williams has demonstrated the inadequacy of typological definitions of Gnosticism to characterize accurately the variety of materials grouped under this rubric (*Rethinking "Gnosticism"*). It is increasingly apparent that the reification of the (normative) rhetorical category of Gnosticism into a monolithic historical entity is untenable. The bifurcating frame of orthodoxy and heresy (here represented as orthodoxy versus Gnosticism) does not do justice to the theological or sociological diversity of early Christianity. Appeal to a "Gnostic redeemer myth" or "typical Gnostic themes" is no longer sufficient to determine the social or theological setting of a work like the *Gospel of Mary*. For further discussion, see King, *What is Gnosticism?*.

39. See Brock, *Mary Magdalene*.

40. This competition is still a live issue, especially for Catholics who base papal authority on the preeminence of Peter as the first witness to the resurrection, as well as others who wish to exclude women from ministry. Peter Kessler, for example, says that it is possible that Mary Magdalene was the first eyewitness of the resurrection, but he contrasts her status with Peter by arguing that "the role of Peter is an official, enduring, public leadership, whereas the leadership of Mary Magdalene is more intimate and temporally prior, but not something of which we have any indication of continuity" (*Peter as the First Witness*, 200–201). He argues that "Peter's witness was not merely a moment of seeing (witnessing of) the risen Lord, but a permanent ministry of proclaiming (witnessing to the gospel that Jesus is alive and is Lord). Such a rediscovery of the Easter context of Peter's primacy, by placing it in its proper context, may help to emphasize the credibility and the profundity of that ministry" (*Peter as the First Witness*, 203). Clearly what is at stake here are challenges to the exclusion of women from leadership in ministry.

41. See Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, especially 101–4.

42. Paraphrasing Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 173.

43. See Funk, *The Acts of Jesus*, 458. Wilhelm Bousset notes in *Kyrios Christos*, 156, that Paul mentions his vision only when he needs to support his authority.

44. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala*, 117. Earlier she had argued that the conflict between Peter and Mary in *GThom* 114 "probably reflects something of the situation of the churches at the time of the writing of this gospel. Peter was a leader in

competition with Mary of Magdala or followers of Peter were in competition with followers of Mary" (100).

45. See, for example, Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 26). See also Price, "Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?"; Maish, *Between Contempt and Veneration*, 26–27; Grappe, *Image du Pierre*, 202–5; Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*.

46. See Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 13–14.

47. Pagels, "Visions, Appearance, and Apostolic Authority," 426–27. Andrew and Peter, Pagels notes, look "to past events, suspicious of those who 'see the Lord' in vision," while Mary "claims to experience his continuing presence" (*The Gnostic Gospels*, 13–14). Pagels has further argued that: "From these [Gnostic] accounts we observe, *first*, that the authority and commission of the disciples (or 'apostles') depends not on the witness to the resurrection for which ecclesiastical Christians revere them, but on special visions and revelations that go beyond orthodox tradition. *Second*, the accounts define that authoritative circle in different ways... Despite their differences these texts [*Apocalypse of Paul, Letter of Peter to Philip, Dialogue of the Savior*] seem to agree—against ecclesiastical tradition—that belonging to the original circle of disciples (or 'apostles') matters less than receiving new and continuing visions" ("Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority," 422). For Pagels, the *Gospel of Mary* represents the most extreme of these works insofar as "the disciples consent to receive this revelation from Mary, acknowledging that her direct contact with the Lord through visions surpasses their own" ("Visions, Appearance, and Apostolic Authority," 425).

48. This position regarding the sources of revelation, Pagels argues, correlates with a "devaluation of the apostles' original witness," and resulted in a strong response from ecclesiastical Christianity in legitimizing "a hierarchy of persons through whose authority in teaching and discipline all others must approach God" (Pagels, "Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority," 425, 430).

49. See King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority."

50. Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 130 and see note 14, contra Pagels, Pasquier, King, Marjanen; on p. 153, n. 141, she adds a reference to Petersen.

51. Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 153.

52. See King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority," 24.

53. See also Marjanen's discussion of transfiguration material in other works (*The Woman Jesus Loved*, 166–67).

54. Perkins had earlier made this point in passing, in a comparison with *Apocalypse of Peter*; see *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 133.

55. Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 154.

56. It should be said that Hartenstein does consider the *Gospel of Mary* to be a Gnostic work, and she understands the contrasting portrayal of the disciples in terms of orthodox versus gnostic teaching. Here Peter and Andrew represent orthodoxy; Mary and Levi, Gnosticism. Those who teach a gnostic understanding of the Savior's teaching are the true apostles, according to the *Gospel of Mary*.

57. Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 130–32. This point assumes that Levi is not identified with Matthew at this stage of tradition.

58. See Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre*, 150. She argues that Mary's response to Peter and Andrew indicates that neither of them is willing to go so far as to suggest that she is lying. The effect of Mary's reply is rather to sharpen the point that Peter (and the other disciples—and readers) must either accept everything Mary has said or fundamentally deny that she is a disciple. Already by causing a rift among the disciples, Peter shows himself to be the guilty one.

59. In the first edition of the Berlin Codex, Walter Till argued that Mary plays

the main role in the second half of the work where her teaching is the main topic, but that she played little or no role in the first part of the work, the Savior's appearance and dialogue with his disciples. Indeed, he suggested that these two parts were originally independent works, and that the scene where Mary comforts the distraught disciples at the end of part one was added to link the two otherwise completely unrelated works (see Till and Schenke, *Die gnostischen Schriften*, 26). Till clearly does not count Mary as one of the apostles, but states rather that the *Gospel of Mary* "elevates her over the apostles." Till of course published this work before knowing the Nag Hammadi texts in which Mary is reckoned among the disciples/apostles in a variety of works classified as revelation dialogues (such as *DSav, SoJsChr, 1 ApocJas*), but he does note the corresponding portrait of Mary in *PiSo*. Nonetheless, he does not treat Mary as an apostle. Pheme Perkins classifies the *Gospel of Mary* among "the non-apostles." (The chapter title is: "Those Whom Jesus Loves: The Non-Apostles.") She wrongly translates 10:10, saying that Mary "is called 'the one whom the Savior loved more than the apostles because of her gnosis.'" She then concludes: "She clearly represented the Gnostic claim to a truth greater than that contained in the apostolic tradition" (*The Gnostic Dialogue,* 134).

60. See Koester, "La Tradition apostolique."

61. See Brooten, "'Junia ... Outstanding among the Apostles'." For a long time scholars emended the name of the woman apostle, Junia, mentioned by Paul in *Rom* 16:7, to a man's name "Junias," assuming that it must be an error since women could not be apostles. The manuscript tradition is clear, however, that Junia is the name of a woman whom Paul says is "outstanding among the apostles," and many English Bible translations are now being updated to correct this error.

62. See Brock, *Mary Magdalene,* 1–18, 169–70; "What's in a Name?"

63. So, too, in *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the Savior commissions his disciples (12 men and 7 women), and at the end of the work they begin to preach the gospel.

64. For an excellent and more extensive discussion of Peter, see R. Brown et al., *Peter in the New Testament.*

65. See *Did* 9–10.

66. See *Did* 11.

67. Ash argues that prophecy was appropriated by the episcopate at the expense of women's prophetic leadership ("The Decline of Ecstatic Prophecy"; see also Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 294–309). This view is opposed by Robeck, *Prophecy in Carthage*, 203–5.

68. *De anima* 9:4 (cited from Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*, 264, slightly modified).

69. It is of note that the post-resurrection appearance of the Savior to the disciples does not have the same status as Mary's visionary experience. In other situations, such an appearance could well be conceived as prophetic.

70. The Greek text reads *en horamati* ("in a vision").

71. For a fuller discussion, see Potter, *Prophets and Emperors.*

72. Tertullian argued, for example, that the human soul is the same as the human spirit, but is to be distinguished from the spirit of God and the spirits sent by Satan. Using King Saul as an example, he notes that a spirit can be good or evil (*De anima* 11).

73. *Dialogue with Trypho* 4 (text in Otto, 18).

74. I love this little text exactly for this practicality. It tells us, for example, "If

you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, but if you cannot, then do what you can" (*Did* 6:2; trans. Lake, 319).

75. *Did* 12; see also 10:7; 13; 15:1–2.

76. See, for example, the exposures by Hippolytus, *Refutations*, or the amusing portrait of a charlatan by the Roman author Lucius, called *Alexander the Quack Prophet*.

77. A good example is the condemnation of "Jezebel" in *Rev* 2:20–23; see Räisänen, "The Nicolaitans."

78. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heresies*, chapters 6 and 30.

79. We learn, by the way, that Philomene's prophecies had been collected and written down by a male disciple. She was apparently a significant enough threat to warrant condemnation.

80. For example, Priscilla's virginity is called into question by Apollonius (Eusebius, *HistEccl* 5:18); the Asian woman prophet noted by Cyprian is accused of seducing a deacon (Cyprian, *Epistle* 74:10). Note, too, that the male heretic Marcus was also accused of seducing women (Irenaeus, *AgHer* 1.13.1–4).

81. For example, Tertullian, in his refutation of Marcion, writes: "Similarly, when (Paul) prescribes silence for women in the church, that none should deviate merely to speak out of ambition—although he already shows that they have the right of prophesying when he imposes a veil upon women prophets—he is taking from the law (the view) that women be subject to authority" (*Against Marcion*, 5.8; text in Semler, 347–48).

The issue of conformity to the teachings of the churches was invoked as well in these debates, but this point was rather rhetorical in the first and second centuries since the rule of faith had not yet been clearly established. The issue of conformity thus pointed quite anxiously to the spectral absence of a normative standard against which prophecy could be measured. In practice, then, questions about the truth of prophecy take us right into the middle of debates over the meaning of Jesus' teaching, interpretation of scripture, community organization, and leadership. *GMary* is fully engaged in these debates, as I have shown elsewhere (see "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene" in *Searching the Scriptures*, 621–25).

82. For example, Diodorus of Sicily writes of the Delphic oracle: "It is said that in ancient times virgins delivered the oracles because virgins have their natural innocence intact and are in the same case as Artemis; for indeed virgins were alleged to be well suited to guard the secrecy of disclosures made by oracles. In more recent times, however, people say that Echecrates the Thessalian, enamoured of her because of her beauty, carried her away with him and violated her; and that the Delphians because of this deplorable occurrence passed a law that in future a virgin would no longer prophesy but that an elderly woman of fifty should declare the oracles and that she should be dressed in the costume of a virgin, as a sort of reminder of the prophetess of olden times" (*The Library of History* 16.26.26; cited from Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*, 253). For additional examples, see the examples in Wire: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.129–46,151–53; *The Confession and Prayer of Asenath*; Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi* 405CD; Plutarch, *Lives: Numa* 5 and 8; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* II.24.1; Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*.

83. As is common with witchcraft accusations against both men and women, the charges here are raised because their conservative opponents feel they have overstepped acceptable boundaries by advocating changes in established relations and practices. Ideology that attempts to relegate women to areas separate from politics can here be used against them in a kind of circular social logic.

While women's presence was the normal practice in Christian worship, Karen Torjesen has argued that a woman exercising public leadership could be open to charges of immorality (see *When Women were Priests*, 143–49).

84. See, for example, *De anima* 9.4.

85. *On Monogamy*, 2.3 (text in Mattei, 136).

86. See *De anima* 9.4 (text in Waszink, 11).

87. Epiphanius, for example, can base his arguments against the Montanists by appeal to Scripture in a way that would not have been possible in the first and early second centuries.

88. See *AgHer* 3.2.1.

89. See *AgHer* 1.30.14.

90. For example, *GThom* (Salome); *1ApocJas* (Martha, Salome, and Arsinoe); *PiSo* (Mary the mother, Martha, and Salome).

91. See the discussion of Morard, "Une Évangile écrit par une femme?"

92. See Cole, "Could Greek Women Read and Write?"; Kraemer, "Women's Authorship"; Rowlandson, *Women and Society*, 299–312.

93. Based on the reconstruction of Wire, *Corinthian Woman Prophets.*

94. Interestingly enough, this is true even in the case of the martyr Perpetua. One might expect her to identify with the suffering Christ, but it is the risen Christ she encounters in her vision, and it is victory she experiences in her combat in the arena, not passive endurance in the face of suffering.

95. The list of works being produced on this topic is burgeoning. The best and most foundational work is still Schüssler Fiorenza's ground-breaking work, *In Memory of Her.*

96. See *Luke* 8:1–3.

97. See *Rom* 16:7; Brooten, "Junia."

98. See *Acts* 18:26–27.

99. See *1 Cor* 16:19; *Rom* 16:3.

100. *Col* 4:15.

101. See *Acts* 16:14–15.

102. See *Rom* 16:1.

103. See *Rom* 16:6.

104. See *1 Cor* 11:2–16; Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets.*

105. See *Acts* 21:8–9.

106. See Eusebius, *HistEccl* 5.17.2–3.

107. See Eusebius, *HistEccl* 5.13.2; Tertullian, *Prescription against Heresies*, chapters 6 and 30; Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters*, 373–426.

108. See *The Martyrdom of Perpetua.*

109. See the examples given in Kienzle and Walker, *Women Prophets and Preachers.*

110. See King, "Afterword."

111. In the *Gospel of Mary*, this self is referred to as "the child of humanity" or "the perfect Human."

112. See, for example, *1 Cor* 12–14.

113. See, for example, *1 Tim* 3–5.

114. The questions of whether, when and where it had been illegal to be a Christian are matters requiring considerable nuance. In the early centuries, Christianity was not always precisely illegal, but neither was it condoned. Much depended upon local attitudes and the personal views of the current Roman emperor. It was only in the third century that two systematic attempts to wipe Christianity out were made. The importance of Constantine's edict is that it ended state persecution of Christians as such.

Terms & Sources

Against Heresies, see Irenaeus

androgyny The state of possessing both male and female characteristics.

Apocryphon of John A revelation from Christ to his disciple John after the resurrection. Dated to the mid-second century CE, this work is an important treatise on early Christian views of theology, creation, and salvation. A copy was included in the Berlin Codex, and three additional copies were recovered from the find near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Apocalypse of Paul A first person account of Paul's ascension through the heavens (see *2 Cor* 12:2–4), probably written in the second century. The only existing copy was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Apocalypse of Peter A post-resurrection dialogue between Peter and the Savior in which the Savior reveals the true meaning of the crucifixion and arrest of Jesus. It polemicizes against the "bishops and deacons" of the church who wrongly believe in the physical resurrection and the value of martyrdom. It probably dates to the early third century. The only existing copy was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

apocalyptic A theological perspective that through an act of divine intervention the present world is about to be destroyed and replaced with a new and better world in which God's justice prevails.

Augustine Early Christian theologian and bishop of Hippo in North Africa (396–430 CE). He exerted enormous influence on the development of orthodox Christianity in the Latin West.

beatitudes Literary or oral formulations that confer good fortune on the recipient. They usually begin with the expression "Congratulations to" (more traditionally translated as "Blessed is").

Book of Thomas the Contender A revelation dialogue between the resurrected Jesus and his twin brother Judas Thomas. Its tone and content are dominated by the condemnation of sexual intercourse and attachment to the flesh. Possibly composed in Syria (ca. 225 CE), the only existing copy was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

canon A closed collection or list of authoritative books accepted as holy scripture. The canon was determined for Roman Catholics at the Council of Trent in 1546 CE; it has never been determined for Protestants, except by common consent and the action of some individual denominations.

Dialogue of the Savior The report of a dialogue between the Savior and his disciples, including Judas, Mary, and Matthew. It was probably composed in the second century CE. The only existing copy is in a badly damaged manuscript found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Didache An early Christian compendium of instruction, also known as the *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*. The final form of the *Didache*, which was discovered in 1875, dates from the early second century, but its main sections go back to the first century.

Eusebius Theologian and bishop of Caesarea in ca. 314. He was the author of the first extensive *History of the Church*, tracing the origins of Christianity from the first century up to the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity. He attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

First Apocalypse of James A second-century revelation dialogue between the Lord and his brother, James. Although the only surviving manuscript, discovered near Nag Hammadi in 1945, is badly damaged, it is clear that the work contains advice to James about how to overcome the attacks of the hostile powers that rule the world and try to keep him from ascending.

Gospel of the Nazarenes An expanded vision of the *Gospel of Matthew* preserved in quotations and allusions in early Christian writings and in marginal notations found in a number of medieval manuscripts. It is evidently a translation of the Greek *Gospel of Matthew* into Aramaic or Syriac. The earliest surviving reference is a quotation in Hegesippus around 180 CE. It probably comes from western Syria.

Gospel of Peter An account of the death and resurrection of Jesus, probably dating to the end of the first century CE. A fragmentary copy of an eighth to ninth century Greek manuscript was discovered in the nineteenth century in upper Egypt.

Gospel of Philip A compilation of diverse materials, including teachings of and about Christ, dogmatic pronouncements, parables and allegories, and statements about early Christian sacraments of baptism and a rite called "the bridal chamber." The theological views of the work fit with those of the disciples of Valentinus, and the work may be dated to the late second or early third centuries. The only existing copy was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Gospel of the Savior A fragmentary second-century gospel, contained in a papyrus manuscript that was written sometime in the fourth to seventh centuries. The surviving portion of the text recounts a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples set shortly before the crucifixion. It was first published in 1999.

Gospel of Thomas A collection of sayings and parables of Jesus from the first or second centuries CE. Although three Greek fragments were recovered from Oxyrhynchus, the only complete copy was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945 written in the Coptic language.

Gospel of Truth A treatise or sermon giving a figurative interpretation of the significance of Christ for salvation. It was probably composed by the theologian and poet Valentinus, who was born in Egypt and taught in Rome in the mid-second century CE. Two copies (one very fragmentary) were found near Nag Hammadi in 1945.

History of the Church, see Eusebius.

Irenaeus Born in Smyrna in Asia Minor, he was a theologian who studied and taught in Rome and probably later became the bishop of Lyon (ca.

115-202 CE). Among his writings is a polemical work titled *Against Heresies* (ca. 180) that described and refuted the views of Christians he opposed.

lacuna A gap in a manuscript caused by damage or deterioration.

Letter of Peter to Philip A narrative that begins with a letter telling Philip to gather with the other apostles on the Mount of Olives where they receive an appearance and revelation from the risen Christ. The only existing copy was found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It was probably composed in the second century CE.

Nag Hammadi The town in Egypt near which a discovery of ancient papyrus books was made in 1945.

Nicene Creed A formulation of Christian dogma made in 325 CE at the Council of Nicaea, a gathering of male bishops called and headed by the Roman Emperor Constantine to resolve problems of internal controversy in the Church.

On the Origin of the World A philosophical treatise and account of the creation of the world. It retells the creation story of *Genesis* from a perspective which assumes the creator God is ignorant and wicked. A complete copy of the work was found near Nag Hammadi in 1945. It probably dates to the second or early third centuries CE.

original sin The theological doctrine, articulated by Augustine of Hippo, that the male seed was vitiated through the sin of Adam and Eve (pride). Sin left humanity in a state in which people are unable to obey God's commandments and hence are in need of God's undeserved grace in order to obtain salvation.

Oxyrhynchus An ancient village in Egypt where numerous papyri have been discovered, including the fragments of early Christian gospels.

Pistis Sophia An extensive revelation dialogue between the Savior and his disciples set after the resurrection in which Mary Magdalene plays a leading role. The only existing copy is contained in a fourth century parchment book called the Askew Codex, which was discovered in the eighteenth century. It was probably composed in the third century CE.

***Q* (*Synoptic Sayings Source*)** *Q* stands for the German word *Quelle*, which means source. Q is a source on which the *Matthew* and the *Luke* draw.

Sophia of Jesus Christ One of the works found near Nag Hammadi in 1945, it contains a second century revelation discourse from the risen Savior to his twelve male and five female disciples. It is a Christianized version of another treatise found near Nag Hammadi, titled *Eugnostos the Blessed.*

Synoptic Sayings Source, see *Q.*

Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, see *Didache.*

Tertullian African theologian of the second and third centuries CE who lived in Carthage. In addition to his apologetic and moral-disciplinary works, his extensive writings include polemical works written against the views of other Christians he opposed, in particular Valentinus and Marcion. He was later condemned as a heretic himself for his support of Montanism, a prophetic movement that arose in second century Phrygia.

Wisdom of Solomon A collection of wisdom materials attributed to Solomon, but written in Greek in the first century BCE, probably in Alexandria, Egypt.

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Karen L. King is the Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard University in the Divinity School.

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